THE PASSIONATE QUEST

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BY

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BOOK ONE

THE PASSIONATE QUEST

CHAPTER I

The electric tramcar which connects the manufacturing town of Norchester with the least unlovely of its outlying suburbs came slowly to a standstill at its terminus, four miles from the starting point. Those who had survived the journey through smoke-hung and grey, crowded streets, the more ornate form of ugliness represented by villas and asphalt pavements, left their places and dispersed. Foremost amongst them, three — a girl and two young men, who had travelled the greater part of the distance in absolute silence — descended from the top with eager footsteps, left the main road at once, and walked steadily along a passably rural lane towards a ridge of fields, rising to a height of a hundred feet or so, and crowned on the summit by a thickly growing plantation of pine trees. They had almost the air of pilgrims, both in the absorbed quality of their silence, which continued for long after they had commenced their walk, and in the definite purpose which they evidently had in view. It was not until they had left the lane, had passed through a gate and were climbing the path which led through the last few meadows to their goal, that any of them attempted speech.

"At last!" the girl murmured, taking off her hat and carrying it. "What a week!"

"Hellish!" the tall, thin boy walking by her side agreed.

"Like all the others," the most ordinary-looking of the

three — a broad-shouldered, square-faced youth who brought up the rear — muttered.

Their efforts at conversation seemed temporarily expended — or perhaps the exertion of climbing the last hundred yards of the hill kept them a little breathless. The girl, as they drew nearer the stretch of wood towards which they were bound, moved her head from side to side as though asking for the caress of the west wind, which came to them now with a sweeter and fresher quality. Her companion paused to tear a little cluster of wild roses from the hedge. The girl accepted them, looked into the petals for a moment and then flung them to the ground.

"Smuts!" she exclaimed. "Even the flowers are blackened! One can't escape, even here, from the filth of that hateful town."

The young man looked down regretfully at the blossom which her foot had crushed.

"The flower itself was exquisite," he remonstrated.

The girl, in her eager bitterness, ceased for a moment to be beautiful.

"I am unjust," she admitted, "but that is because the smuts are settling upon me. A year or two more of this place and I shall be like those wild roses — and I hate the thought!"

They reached their destination, more breathless than ever now, but, so far as the first two were concerned, with an eagerness which seemed incomprehensible. They entered the wood through a gate and passed along a path strewn and sodden with pine needles, soft to the feet and fragrant. All around them, between the bare, straight fronts of the thickly planted trees, they caught little glimpses of the promised land beyond — a real expanse of meadows, cornfields and wooded glades. On the far horizon, it is true, stretched the scars of a smoke-hung

town, and, on their left, factory chimneys here and there marred the landscape. But when they skirted the outside of the plantation and reached its westward corner, there was nothing within the range of their vision but the cornfield sloping down towards the valley, a stretch of meadowland, a steep rise, and, beyond, a rolling waste of moorland, starred with yellow gorse, faintly pink in sheltered places with the promise of the early bell heather. For the first time, all disfiguring traces of untoward industrial efforts were absent.

The girl flung herself down on the ground with something which sounded almost like a sob of relief, her arms outstretched, her eyes searching the blue skies. The younger of her two companions followed her example, sharing apparently to the full the emotion with which she welcomed this change of surroundings. The third person in the pilgrimage proceeded to make himself comfortable in more leisurely fashion. He chose a place with his back to a tree, produced a cheap briar pipe, and deliberately filled it with tobacco of unprepossessing appearance. His very performance of the action was typical. He was slow but thorough; his square-tipped, capable fingers pressed the tobacco skilfully into its appointed place; the few shreds which remained in his hand he emptied carefully back into the pouch, which he restored to his pocket. As soon as he had commenced to smoke, he broke the silence.

"Well," he began, "now that you two have dragged me up here, let's hear what you have to say."

The girl by his side half opened her eyes.

"Not yet," she murmured. "I want to listen."

The young man withdrew his pipe from his mouth.

"Listen to what?" he asked. "I can't hear anything particular."

The long-limbed youth on the other side of the girl,

who had been lying flat on his back in the sunshine, turned over towards his two companions and laughed.

"My dear Matthew," he said, speaking with a natural but not unpleasant drawl, which seemed somehow out of keeping with his ready-made clothes and clumsy boots, "of course you can hear nothing particular, but that is because your ear is not attuned to the music of the world. Rosina is listening to the wind amongst the corn tops there. Can't you hear it rustling and whispering all the way across from that cluster of poppies, and high up in the tree tops above your head, too — a more melancholy note there, perhaps, but still music?"

"Is it!" the young man named Matthew replied shortly. "I prefer a gramophone. And, anyhow, we didn't come out here to listen — we came to talk. If Rosina wants to rest, you go ahead, Philip. Tell me what it is that you two have been putting your heads together about."

"In a moment," the other assented drowsily. "If sounds do not attract you, what about scents? All the week I have worked with the poisonous smell of leather and of oil in my nostrils. Just now I am perfectly sure that we are near some wild sweetbriar. Put your head down, Matthew, and smell the earth itself. There's something rich about it, like sunwarmed herbs. There's sap, too, bursting out from the trunk of the pine tree against which you are leaning. Not even that foul tobacco which you are smoking — thank heavens the breeze is the other way! — can poison this atmosphere."

"It is very good tobacco," Matthew replied stolidly. "It is strong, I know, but it is very cheap, and, being strong, one does not desire to smoke so much of it."

"There is not the slightest doubt but that some day you will be a millionaire," Philip declared.

"I intend to be," was the calm rejoinder.

"Any further ambitions?" Rosina asked, opening her very beautiful hazel eyes for a moment.

"What others could there be?" Matthew demanded. "The only choice in life seems to me to be the means by which one can make money."

Philip sighed gently.

"And this youth," he murmured, — "I beg his pardon, I forgot that he was twenty-four to-day — has been our companion for eleven years!"

Matthew raised himself a little, sitting with his knees drawn up and his hands clasped around them. His face, with its massive chin and broad forehead, had its good points, but his eyes were too close together and his lips acquisitive. The dominant and redeeming quality of his expression was its forcefulness.

"Look here," he said, "you two seem to think yourselves very superior because you read poetry and go to concerts whilst I learn shorthand and typewriting and attend technical schools. Yet, if either of you were to ask yourselves a plain question and answer it truthfully, you would discover that you wanted pretty well what I want out of life. Philip wants to write stories. Well, the measure of his success will be how much, if anything, they'll pay him for them. Art has an exact and commercial value, and that value can be written down in pounds, shillings and pence. And Rosina here wants beautiful clothes, silks to drape about her body, pearls to hang upon her neck, and *carte blanche* at Cook's to buy tickets for every corner of the world. What does that all mean except pounds, shillings and pence? I go the short way about it, and you two prefer the twisting paths. You'll probably get into a maze, you won't know where you are, you'll confuse the end with the means, and you'll forget what you started out for. That's why I like my way best. I'm not out to pull any stars down

from heaven, or to waste time dreaming about them. I'm out for a big banking account, and I'll decide afterwards what I'll do with the money, when I've got it."

The girl looked for a moment distressed. Her eyes were wide open now, her forehead a little wrinkled. Something of the momentary peace which had come into her face had passed away.

"Philip and I have never thought ourselves superior," she protested gently, "and I know that a great deal of what you say is true, although it sounds cruel. It is true that I want beautiful clothes and pearls, and that those things mean money, but I also want even more to travel, to live and move in beautiful places, to hear beautiful music when I choose, to possess the books I want, and have the people I like always near me. What do you want your wealth for, Matthew? You must have some idea."

"Power," he answered shortly.

"And what use would you make of that power?" Philip asked, with interest.

Matthew pressed down the tobacco in his pipe and smoked stolidly for a moment.

"I should like to fill a great place in the financial world," he replied. "I should like to build up an immense business, sell it, buy other people's businesses, sell them, and make money on every deal. I should like people to point to me in Lombard Street. I should like bank managers to come to me for advice and help. I should like to have it in my power to ruin whom I chose."

"It is perfectly clear," Philip declared, with a note of mockery in his tone so faint that neither of his companions noticed it, "that our task, Rosina, ought to be an easy one. You cannot mount many rungs of the ladder of your desire in Norchester, Matthew. We brought you out here this afternoon to tell you that Rosina and

I intend to leave this place almost at once, and to ask you to join us."

"Where are you going to?" Matthew asked.

"To London," they answered in one breath.

"Have you told Uncle Benjamin?"

"We are going to tell him to-night," Rosina replied. "We thought that if you decided to come too, you might help us. You seem to be able to talk to Uncle Benjamin better than we do."

"How much money have you got?" Matthew enquired.

"Rosina has eighty-five pounds," Philip answered, "and I have about a hundred and forty. You will have the hundred pounds that is coming to you to-night, and you have probably saved something."

Matthew very nearly smiled. His Post-Office Savings Bank book had been his most treasured possession for the last five years.

"Nothing to speak of," he declared shortly. "However, enough to put us on about level terms. I suppose the three of us could live together cheaper than separately. What are your plans?"

"Philip thought that he might secure a position in some publisher's office until he can get some of his stories accepted," Rosina explained. "Very likely, if he is a sensible publisher, he will want to publish them himself. After that, of course, it will be quite easy."

"And you?"

"I shall eventually go on the stage," Rosina announced, "only, as Philip thinks I am rather young just yet, I shall probably type his stories and work in an office for a little time. It is quite easy to make enough money to live on in London, if one is not extravagant."

"Is it?" Matthew answered laconically.

There was a brief silence. Philip and Rosina watched their companion a little anxiously. In a way, although

they had lived under the same roof since childhood, they were conscious of a certain aloofness between them and him. He represented different things. Yet, when it came to breaking away from such home as they had possessed, and facing the world under new and strange conditions, they felt somehow that there were certain qualities about Matthew which engendered confidence. His very self-reliance, his almost arrogant belief in himself, were infectious. They had no thought of any actual assistance from him. Their only idea was that life was likely to prove more easy, and its problems more readily faced, if he were at hand. Matthew, smoking stolidly on, and gazing with unseeing eyes towards the distant moorland, was weighing the matter slowly in his mind. Were these two likely to be an encumbrance to him? He almost smiled at the thought. He knew very well that he would never permit any one in life to become that. To break away from Norchester alone, at that moment, might have its embarrassments. Their leaving would provide him with a reasonable excuse. And then there was another thing — just a feeling — something he was never likely to give way to, or allow to come between himself and his interests, but which still, in its bald, unlovely way, existed. He turned his head and suffered himself to look at Rosina. She had relapsed for a moment into her old position, and was lying on her back, her eyes watching the slow, upward flight of a lark already high above the tree tops. She was slim, thin almost, with the immaturity of youth, but, although Matthew knew nothing of beauty, he saw the promise of her almost perfect young body. He realised that the pallor of her cheeks had nothing to do with ill health. He even found pleasure in watching the curve of her full but delicate lips, and the specks of gold which the sun seemed to find in her crumpled hair. It was a feeling, he told himself, which he would never

allow to come between him and complete success. Yet one must live whilst one climbed the ladder.

"Yes," he decided, "I will come. We will make a start together, at any rate."

"Good fellow!" Philip exclaimed enthusiastically.

"Bless you!" Rosina murmured, smiling at him delightfully. "I can't tell you how glad I am."

"When did you think of telling Uncle Benjamin?" Matthew enquired.

"After supper to-night," Rosina answered. "We don't want to wait another day. I have been thinking of escape until I feel absolutely on fire with impatience. Fancy, both of you, no more of that horrible Norchester! No more walking through those hideous streets and working in that hateful factory! No more of those ghastly visits to the tradespeople, with Harriet grumbling at everything, trying to beat them down in price until they look as though they'd like to ask us to leave the place! No more chapel, no more prayers morning and night! Oh, I suppose it's ungrateful, but there never was a colder house in this world than Uncle Benjamin's. I don't think the sun has ever shone into a single corner of it. If I stayed there much longer, I should die."

Matthew rose slowly to his feet.

"After supper to-night," he repeated. "Yes, perhaps that would be a good time. I was going down to the technical schools. There are some extra classes there, but I think I know as much as they can teach me. In half an hour we must start for home. I am going for a little walk first."

Rosina threw herself back once more upon the ground. Her hand went frankly out to Philip's, she held his fingers tightly in hers.

"Come back for us," she begged, "when you think we ought to start. Philip and I are going to build palaces."

Matthew stood looking down at them both for a moment, himself ignored. Without a shadow of sensitiveness in his nature, he was dimly aware of the spiritual barrier which separated him from these two, his companions in the great enterprise of life. He turned on his heel.

"Palaces in the air!" he muttered, a little scornfully. "You can build mine for me in Park Lane."

CHAPTER II

There was no man in Norchester more respected or less liked than Benjamin Stone. He had built the first factory of its sort in the town, and become the pioneer of an industry which now provided employment for the greater number of its two hundred thousand inhabitants. He had been mayor three times and would have accepted that office again but for the possibility of a royal visit. Benjamin Stone did not believe in royalty. He was a devout Nonconformist, and an occasional preacher in the chapel which he had built and endowed. He was charitable so far as regarded gifts to institutions, an abstainer from principle, a widower sixty years of age, whose private life was almost absurdly beyond reproach, and his existence would have been even more solitary than it was but for the singular accident of having had the charge of three young people thrust upon him at different times.

Matthew Garner was the orphaned stepson of his sister who had died out in South Africa. Philip Garth was the son of the only friend he had ever possessed, a photographer, unfortunate in business, deserted by his wife, and converted to Nonconformity during the last few months of his life. Rosina was the daughter of his other sister, who, whilst travelling with a Cook's excursion party in France, had committed the amazing indiscretion of falling in love with and marrying a French artist. Benjamin treated the affair as a bereavement, allowed his sister a hundred a year, and returned all her letters unopened until the last one, which came addressed in a strange handwriting. Its contents were brief enough. It was dated

from a small town in the southwest corner of France, and, whatever effect it had upon its recipient, he took no one into his confidence:

> Dear Benjamin:
>
> My husband is dead. They tell me that I am not likely to live for more than a week or two. You have allowed us a hundred pounds a year to live upon, for which I am grateful. I am sending you Rosina, my daughter. It will cost you little more than the hundred a year you will save by my death, to provide for her. I have had a hard life and I am glad to leave it. Are you as religious as ever?
>
> Your sister,
>
> Rose.

Benjamin Stone accepted his three charges, but, whether willingly or not, no man knew, for no one was in his confidence. He lived in a red brick villa which was built at the same time as the chapel, and which was situated next door to it. Both had been constructed on economical lines, and both combined the maximum of ugliness with the minimum of comfort. He himself was a big, lank man, with large bones but little flesh, a face which looked as though it were cut out of granite, cold grey eyes, and black hair only thinly streaked with grey. He generally wore a dark suit of pepper and salt mixture, an unusually high collar, and an inevitable black bow tie, arranged so that the ends neither drooped nor faltered in their task of ornamentation. He had bushy eyebrows which seemed to meet in a perpetual frown. His voice was hard and clear but almost singularly destitute of any human quality. He ate, drank and slept sparingly, he had apparently no pleasures, and his religion was a militant one. Occasionally, on Saturday aft-

ernoons, he played bowls. Even his debtors called him a just man.

Of his three wards, as they grew up, Benjamin Stone made as much use as possible. Philip Garth was his junior clerk, and, as his benefactor did not scruple to tell him, the worst he had ever employed. Matthew, who was two years older, held a more responsible post in the factory, and, but for living in constant conflict with his uncle on matters of administration, might have held a very different position. Rosina went to the office in the mornings, where she typed a few letters, and assisted her uncle's elderly housekeeper-domestic in the afternoons. She could never quite make up her mind which portion of her duties she found the more detestable.

The evening meal at Sion House, which Benjamin Stone had prayerfully called his villa, was served, on this particular evening, at seven o'clock, half-an-hour earlier than usual, by special orders from the head of the house. It was not an elaborate repast, and was accompanied by tea, served in an urn, over which Rosina presided. It was partaken of, as usual, almost in silence, after which the cloth was cleared by the elderly domestic, assisted by Rosina. Every one then resumed his place at the table whilst Benjamin Stone read a chapter from the Bible. When he had closed the Book, he knelt before the horsehair sofa and prayed. There was nothing fervent about his appeal to a Divinity whom he seemed to envisage as a heavenly prototype of himself. He prayed that sinners who fully expiated their sins might be forgiven, that wrongdoers who made full atonement might be received back into the fold. The word "mercy" never once occurred in his discourse. There was a geometrical exactness about his suggestions to the Deity, which took no account of anything outside the great debit and credit ledger. When he had finished, he rose and stood at the

end of the table. It was as though he had some foreknowledge of what was to come.

"Rosina," he said, "and you, Philip, there is a lecture to be given in the chapel this evening on 'Moral Probity in Commercial Life.' It is my wish that you should both attend. Matthew, I believe, has a class at the technical schools."

Rosina looked at once towards Philip, but Philip, as he was so often to do in life, failed her. He hesitated.

"To-night?" he repeated, a little vaguely.

"You will do well to be there in half an hour's time," Benjamin Stone continued. "Representatives of my household should occupy the front pew. Do you hear, Rosina?"

She rose to her feet. Into the ugly room, with its closely drawn, green Venetian blinds, a ray of unwelcomed sunshine found its way between two of the slats. It happened to fall upon her face just as she was nerving herself for the task. She felt, indeed, something of the spirit of a modern Joan of Arc as she spoke the first words of rebellion which had passed her lips for many years, spoke them not fearfully but with a strange wonder that fear was not there.

"Uncle," she told him gently, "I am sorry I cannot go to the lecture — I shall be busy packing."

"Packing?" Benjamin Stone repeated, his eyebrows more than ever contracted. "Explain yourself."

"Philip and I, and Matthew too, I believe," she said, "have made up our minds to leave Norchester. I speak for Philip and myself. Matthew knows his own mind. We are very grateful to you for having supported us all these years, but the time has come when we cannot live here any longer. We are both unhappy."

"Why?" Benjamin Stone demanded.

"Because we both want things in life which Norchester

cannot give us," Rosina went on. "It is very difficult to explain, uncle, and I am not good at explaining, but our minds are quite made up. We want to live somewhere and work somewhere, where for part of the time, at any rate, we can breathe the atmosphere which comes from being surrounded with beautiful things."

"In what part of the world, may I ask, do you intend to search for this atmosphere?" Benjamin Stone enquired, unmoved.

"In London at first," Rosina told him.

"Is London more beautiful than Norchester?"

"It is so difficult to explain," she repeated. "Spiritually, it is. There is music there, wonderful pictures to be seen; there is history, association, people working with big aims and big ideas, the heart of a great city beating in your ears night and day."

Benjamin Stone listened with the air of one who seeks to understand. There was no anger in his face, there was certainly no sympathy.

"Our picture gallery here is well supplied," he said. "We have acquired works — at a ridiculous price, in my opinion — painted by many well-known artists. Marshall's concerts are, I believe, found attractive by the musical element in the town."

Rosina made a little grimace.

"I knew that I could not make you understand, uncle," she sighed. "The pictures we have are just the sort that the great artists sell to the picture galleries of provincial towns, and the concerts — well, the musicians who come down here put their heads together and make an effort to give us of their worst, so that they may be understood. Norchester is typically provincial, uncle. So long as we are here, we are plodding in the mud, almost the slough, and I mean to get out of it."

Benjamin Stone turned to Philip.

"Have you anything to say for yourself?" he asked.

"I agree with everything that Rosina has said," Philip answered. "I am grateful to you for your help and support, but I hate my work here. I want to get away."

"You are the worst clerk," his uncle pronounced, "I ever kept in my office for twenty-four hours. You cannot add up a column of figures correctly, or post a single entry from the day book into the ledger to the right account. How do you propose to earn your living in London?"

"Not as a clerk," Philip declared, with a little burst of passion.

"Then how?" his uncle persisted.

Philip thought of his little box full of manuscripts, and a tinge of colour flushed his cheeks. It seemed irreverent to speak of them as the means by which he was to earn his living.

"I shall write stories," he announced. "I have written a few already."

"Have you made any money out of them?"

"Not yet."

"Have you tried?"

"Yes!"

"Why do you think you will do better in London?"

"Because no one could write anything worth while in such an atmosphere as this," was the almost fierce reply. "I agree with Rosina. We are in the mud here, drifting into the slough. I would sooner starve in London than own your factory here."

"No one will deny you the opportunity," Benjamin Stone assured him coldly. "Now, Matthew, what have you to say? I understand that you, also, are concerned in this."

"I am quite as determined to leave Norchester," Matthew replied, "but my reasons are entirely different ones.

I have nothing against Norchester, if there were any money to be made here, but I have made up my mind that there is no future for me down at the factory."

"Why not? You are a good worker, and, in some respects, capable."

Matthew came a step nearer. His somewhat heavy face was alight with interest. He had the air of a much older man discussing a carefully thought-out problem.

"Look here," he said, "you give me two pounds ten a week for superintending the warehousing of your stock. I am worth more than that, but the job itself is too insignificant. I have studied the organisation of your factory all the way through, from the basement to the clicking room, and you're getting altogether behind the times. You've made a lot of money your way, no doubt, but the one fact you won't recognise is that times are changing. I don't see your balance sheets, but I'm convinced of one thing. You can't make any more by your present old-fashioned methods, and I'm not at all sure that you don't stand to lose a good part of what you've made. If, instead of two pounds ten a week to look after your stock of leather, you will offer me a thousand a year and allow me to remodel the factory from the cellars to the attic, remodel your system of buying and scrap half your old machinery, I might consider staying. Otherwise, I shall be glad of that hundred pounds' legacy you propose to pay me to-night, and I'm off to London with the others."

Benjamin Stone turned his back upon them all, opened his desk and busied himself there for several moments. When he turned around, he had three oblong slips of paper in his hand.

"There is your hundred pounds, Matthew," he said, presenting him with a cheque. "As for you others, you have some small amounts, I believe, in the Savings Bank."

"We don't want any money from you, uncle," Rosina

assured him hastily. "We just want to thank you for all you have done for us, and to ask you to forgive us because we are going away."

"I am sorry that I was such a failure in the factory, sir," Philip said, "but you can see for yourself that I am no use in business."

"You are useless in business because you are incompetent," Benjamin Stone replied firmly, "and you are incompetent because you are lazy, lazy in mind and lazy in body. I accept your thanks, and yours, Rosina, for what I have done for you. Here is a cheque for fifty pounds for each of you. Added to what you have, it may keep you from starvation for a few weeks longer. For the rest, leave this house when and how you choose. I shall ask you to remember only one thing — when you leave it, you leave it for ever."

Philip accepted his cheque readily enough. Rosina took hers with hesitation. There was no shadow of kindliness or regret in the face of the donor. It was impossible to tell from his manner whether the departure of his charges were a sorrow or a relief to him.

"We quite understand that, uncle," Rosina said, a little timidly. "It is very generous of you to give us this money, and, if we may, we should like to part friends."

There was a momentous, almost a dread silence, a silence of which the significance existed only for three of the little gathering. Matthew, with knitted brows, was gazing over Rosina's shoulder at the cheque which she held in her fingers. To him, the words had been said, the farewells spoken; he had no sense of anything unusual in the room. He was engrossed simply by the problem as to whether he had been fairly dealt with in the matter of these farewell gifts. But, in their different ways, the girl and the boy trembling on the verge of life, their revolt rather of the soul than of the body; the man of iron,

the pedagogue of narrow places, three times mayor of the town, and every Sunday an expounder of Christian principles according to his lights — these three had left Matthew on planes beneath. It was with a momentary exaltation that Benjamin opened the door and dismissed his rebellious charges, an exaltation which they more than shared. It was with a sensation of boredom and some resentment that Matthew followed them. The door was firmly closed, the three climbed the stairs and went to their rooms to prepare for their forthcoming journey. Benjamin Stone resumed his chair and drew the Bible towards him. Where he opened it, he read — read aloud to himself — read as one seeking hungrily for comfort in a world which for the first time he failed wholly to understand.

CHAPTER III

Sunday, always an uncomfortable day for the younger inmates of Sion House, proved more than usually tedious on the morrow, both as an institution and in the slow monotony of its drawn-out hours. Rosina alone faced her uncle at breakfast, and, beyond the customary morning greeting, no word was spoken between the two until the school bell began to ring harshly at nine o'clock. Benjamin rose at once to his feet.

"Have you arranged for your class?" he asked.

"I shall teach it myself," Rosina replied. "I can speak to Mrs. Haslem then about some one to take it over."

He left the room without any further word. Rosina added to her simple yellow and white cotton frock a straw hat trimmed with buttercups, and made her way through the private gate, across the asphalt pavement, to the dreary schoolroom whose whitewashed walls were hung with texts and pictorial representations of Scriptural happenings. She bore her part in the attempted instruction of a dozen or more ungainly, unprepossessing and unimaginative children, spoke a few kindly words to them of farewell, without evoking, however, the slightest trace of any feeling save one of curiosity as to a possible successor. She was forced to use more than her usual tact in avoiding the attentions of the male teachers, frock-coated and silk-hatted youths of anemic complexion and artificial ways. The pastor himself, an older and somewhat more robust replica of the species, stopped her at the door. He was a young man of goodly qualities and

narrow vision, who had, however, an honest belief in himself and his work. His parentage was Scotch.

"This is ill news I am hearing from your uncle, Miss Vonet," he said, shaking hands with her and forgetting to release her fingers. "I am glad of the opportunity of a word with you on the subject."

Rosina was not in the least inclined to submit to outside admonitions. Besides, she had had quite enough of the Reverend Donald Stuart and his far-away love-making.

"I don't think that it can be very ill news for any one," she replied. "Personally, I am delighted at the idea of leaving Norchester, and I can't think that it matters very much to any one else whether I go or stay."

"There's more than that about it," the young man said earnestly. "Mind, I'm not agreeing with you. There are others besides your uncle who will miss you. It's not only that, however. London is no place for young women, especially young women not properly protected. It's a city that's full of snares and pitfalls."

"I think I shall rather like places like that," Rosina told him ingenuously. "I am very tired of Norchester."

"It does not become a man or woman or child, desiring to live a Christian life, to speak with levity of the paths that lead to sin," the pastor continued gravely. "If the conditions of your life here have not provided you with the happiness you desire, remember that they may at any time be changed."

"I don't see how," Rosina replied. "My uncle wouldn't even let me join the tennis club."

"If that were all," the young man declared, with some eagerness, "perhaps something might be arranged. The tennis club to which you allude is frequented by the more frivolous portion of the community in this district, and your uncle's objection to it is entirely justified. It is in

my mind, however, to start something of the sort in connection with the chapel. If every care were exercised as to membership, I do not believe that your uncle would have any objection to your joining. It is my hope, indeed, that he may afford us financial assistance."

"Very nice for you all, I'm sure," Rosina remarked, "but I should think a tennis club limited to the members of your congregation would be terribly dull. Besides, I don't know of any one who can play."

"We could learn," he suggested humbly.

Rosina laughed at him pleasantly.

"I only mentioned the tennis club allegorically, Mr. Stuart," she said. "You wouldn't understand my reasons for wishing to go to London, and if you did, you wouldn't approve of them. Besides, everything now is definitely arranged."

She moved forward but he still blocked the way. He was a short man, with curly flaxen hair, and even now, in his youthful days, inclined to corpulence. From his point of view, Rosina was a sister in grievous danger. She also appealed to him in another, and altogether unsisterly fashion.

"There is something I had made up my mind to say to you, Miss Vonet," he announced, "which might possibly have weight with you in considering this matter."

"Mr. Stuart," she replied, looking into his narrow but very earnest blue eyes, "nothing that you could possibly say would make the slightest difference."

"Your uncle," he began —

She shook her head.

"My uncle," she interrupted, "belongs to the world I am leaving. We have bidden one another farewell. He is a good and just man, I have no doubt, but to me he is simply a granite image. Please do not quote my uncle."

"Then may I speak for myself?" he persisted.

"I am sorry," Rosina replied, "but if you do I am sure I shall laugh. I don't want to do that — I know that it wouldn't be respectable. There are so many well-behaved and nice young women in your congregation. Save up what you were going to say, please, for one of them."

She took advantage of a sudden movement on his part and flitted by him. The elderly vice-superintendent of the schools, who had been waiting for her, made an effort to cut off her retreat. Rosina, however, by a strategic move, avoided him by returning to the house instead of directly entering the chapel. She found Matthew deep in thought in the ugly and shiny parlour. He was engaged in making some calculations on the back of an envelope, and he looked at her in surprise.

"Hello," he exclaimed, "I thought you were going to chapel?"

"So I am presently," she replied. "I've come in to take cover for a moment. Am I looking rather nice this morning, Matthew?"

He looked at her with stolid and level scrutiny. There was something in his eyes, however, which escaped her.

"You are always attractive, Rosina," he said. "These summery clothes may not be altogether to the liking of the chapel folk, but they suit you."

"Oh, the chapel folk are liking me all right!" she laughed. "I've just had to use all my ingenuity to stop Mr. Stuart proposing to me. Then I discovered Mr. Holmes lurking about with danger in his eye."

"A widower grocer with six children!" Matthew scoffed.

"A human being, I suspect, although a Sunday-school vice-superintendent!" Rosina remarked, looking at herself in the mirror. "Of course, these people ought not to admire my type at all, but they seem to. There would

be a lot of trouble if I were staying here much longer! What are you figuring out so carefully, Matthew?"

"I am going into the subject of my finances," Matthew said, with a frown. "I don't mind telling you that I am disappointed. I confidently expected a farewell gift of some sort or another from Uncle Benjamin."

"You've got your hundred pounds," she reminded him.

"The hundred pounds was not a gift at all," he declared. "It was a legacy to which I had a right. I am the only one of the three who has been any real use to him, and I do not understand his reason for giving you two fifty pounds and me nothing."

"I would rather he had given neither of us anything," Rosina confessed. "We could do without the money easily, and it only increases our sense of indebtedness."

"No one can do without money," Matthew said sternly. "I am surprised to hear you talk like that, Rosina. That fifty pounds would have put my finances in much better shape."

"I'm willing to divide, if Philip is," Rosina suggested.

"I may take advantage of your offer," Matthew replied, with a covetous gleam in his eyes. "I shall consider the matter."

"In the meantime, do look out and see if the coast is clear for me, there's a dear," Rosina begged. "I don't want to go in too late, it makes uncle so cross, but another attempted proposal before service would make me hysterical."

Matthew rose to his feet and looked out of the window.

"Mr. Holmes has just gone inside," he announced. "There is no one else there except a few women and the verger."

"Then here goes!" she exclaimed, as she left the room.

Rosina sat by her uncle's side in the front pew of the chapel, prayed when he prayed, sang when he sang, and

composed herself as comfortably as might be in the hard, pinewood seat, to listen to the words of exhortation addressed by Mr. Stuart to his congregation. She recognised the fact more than once that she was in the preacher's mind. He spoke of the joy of the safe places, the spiritual discomfort of worldly wanderings, the impossibility of touching pitch without becoming defiled. He spoke of the beauty of Christian love, and the holy and satisfying beauty of living in one's appointed spot. Rosina yawned. When it was over, she left the chapel with light, eager footsteps. Her uncle, as she well knew, must remain to count the offertory.

"In my heart," she murmured, as she crossed the asphalt pavement, "I know that I am religious, only it isn't that sort."

There was the savour of hot meat and cooked vegetables in the house when Rosina returned, and there followed a dreary meal, a trial more abundant than usual on account of Mr. Stuart's presence and Philip's absence. The harsh clanging of the Sunday-school bell found her in a state of insurrection. She abandoned her class and shut herself up in her room to pack, a task to which she devoted herself with so much fervour that the hours slipped by without her noticing them. The tea bell remained unanswered. Philip, who had returned from the country, brought her a cup into her room. Afterwards, he sat for a few moments on her trunk and talked to her.

"Matthew and I are not to put in an appearance again at the factory," he announced. "Uncle Benjamin has just made it very clear that the less he sees of any of us after breakfast to-morrow morning, the better he will be pleased."

"Well, that suits us, doesn't it?" Rosina remarked. "I'm simply aching in every limb to find myself in the train."

Philip nodded.

"I am with you entirely," he declared. "The only thing is that I ought to have tidied up a little down at the office. I'm afraid I left things in rather a muddle."

"Why don't you go down now and clear up?" Rosina suggested. "You have your key."

Philip slipped to the ground.

"An idea!" he exclaimed. "I'll go down and say good-by to the old shop."

He took his hat and stick, boarded a tramcar and rode to the principal industrial suburb of the town, where his uncle's factory was situated. The enterprise somewhat appealed to him. So many times he had found himself travelling in the same direction with a sense almost of nausea at the idea of his day's task, that this detached mission of his seemed to possess a flavour of originality. He looked at the grim factory, when he arrived at the end of the street where it was situated, with new eyes, swung open the heavy door, and looked into each of the long, ghostlike rooms as he ascended. He whistled softly to himself as he entered the office. The safe door was open, the cash box upon the table. It pleased his fancy to light a cigarette and smoke it in these hallowed precincts.

"I was certainly not meant to be a clerk," he remarked, as he looked around him. "I was afraid I hadn't put the cash box away."

He looked at it for a moment in puzzled fashion. There were several fat sheaves of Treasury notes lying in the top compartment. He took them up and counted them.

"I suppose it's all right," he muttered, as he held them in his hand before putting them away. "I thought there were eight of these packets," he added, running the notes through his fingers, — "fifty pounds each. Must have been seven."

He was in the act of locking the safe when he stopped short and listened. There was a sort of shuffling sound below, as though some one were descending the stairs stealthily. He hurried out and stood upon the landing.

"Hullo!" he shouted. "Who's there?"

There was no reply. The sound had ceased. Philip began to wonder whether he was a coward. His heart was beating more quickly. The ghostly silence of the place unnerved him.

"Hullo there!" he shouted, more loudly still.

Again no reply. Philip felt his forehead and found that it was wet.

"This is damned foolishness!" he muttered. "There can be no one in the place."

At that moment the outside door closed, not with a bang but with soft and stealthy deliberation. Philip hurried into the clicking room, on his way to the broad windows which commanded the street. The room, however, was divided into two by a partition, and the communicating door was locked. By the time he had made his way round and scrambled upon the bench to obtain a view of the street, there was nothing to be seen. He jumped down and shook the dust from his clothes.

"This is imagination," he decided. "There was no one there — there could have been no one there."

Thereupon he made a brave showing. He retraced his steps to the office, completed his task of leaving everything in order, helped himself to his old coat and cap, descended the stairs, let himself out and marched boldly up the street. For ever afterwards in his mind, however, he registered a dislike for empty buildings.

A few minutes later, Benjamin Stone sat in the chair which Philip had vacated. The cash box stood open before him, a small memorandum book was by his side. Three times he counted the little sheaves of notes, three

times he turned back and compared them with the rough wage book. Then he abandoned his task. He sat very still, looking through the glass front of the office down the long, empty room beyond. An earnest and profound religious belief had helped him to find every crisis in life simple. For the first time he was assailed with doubts. For the first time he felt the grim despair of a man confronted with unimagined tragedy. He was a man who loved money, but it was not the loss of the fifty pounds which had brought the grey colour into his cheeks and that sense of horror into his whole being. It was the fact that the thief was one of those brought up under his own roof, for whose moral probity he was almost responsible. He picked up Philip's cigarette stump and threw it into the wastepaper basket, gazed at the empty peg from which the cap and coat had vanished. Then, with a little groan, his head sank upon his folded arms.

CHAPTER IV

The pilgrimage commenced on the following day a little tremulously for Rosina and Philip, notwithstanding their boundless enthusiasm; confidently and placidly for Matthew. They found, on the night of their arrival in London, three small bedrooms and a smaller sitting room, on the fifth floor of a lodging house in Maltby Street, W. C., which is somewhere between Long Acre and the district where second-hand book shops and hand-printed notices of "Rooms to let for single gentlemen" suggest the neighbourhood of the British Museum. Their breakfast, on the following morning, consisted of an egg each, a loaf of bread and a quarter of a pound of butter, commodities selected by Matthew during an early morning stroll around the neighbourhood. Rosina made tea in a brown teapot, and urns were for ever solemnly forsworn. Matthew was for starting out immediately on the great adventure, but for once in his life he gave way to popular clamour. It was Rosina's entreaties which prevailed.

"Our first day in London, Matthew," she pleaded. "We must spend it all together, and spend it wonderfully."

"I rather thought of calling on a few firms in the city," Matthew remarked thoughtfully. "One must make a start."

"Oh, bother your start!" Rosina laughed. "You can do as you like to-morrow, but to-day we stretch our arms and look up at the sun and thank God for our freedom! We are going to count the treasures which the fates may have in store for us."

"You mean that you are going to waste a day," Matthew rejoined stolidly.

"Not waste it," Philip declared. "We are going to pause just for a moment and look down on the city of our desires. We are going to play the conscious and deliberate philanderer. We are going to choose our places in the scheme of the Universe, with care and caution."

"You're right if you mean that it's no use accepting the first thing that's offered," Matthew agreed, a little puzzled. "I shall call on at least five places in the city before I make up my mind."

Philip was rolling a cigarette with a broad grin upon his face. Rosina leaned over and passed her arm around Matthew's shoulder.

"Don't be so atrociously literal, Matthew," she begged. "What I propose is this. London is the city of allegories. Let us each show the other what it is that we seek in life; then to-morrow we will set to work in earnest to find it. Let to-day be a day of dreams; to-morrow we can take the first step on the ladder of attainment."

"If you'd put it into plain English," Matthew grumbled, "I should know where I was. Do you mean that we go riding about on 'buses all day, because that costs money?"

"Listen," Rosina continued, "you have done all the practical work up to now. You showed us how to get our money out of the Savings Bank, you bargained for the rooms here and got them a great deal cheaper than we should have done, you even brought the breakfast. It rests with you, then, to begin. Take us to the Mecca of your dreams, show us the places where you desire to be supreme. After you have finished, we will follow where Philip leads. And after that, it will be my turn."

"Very well," Matthew agreed, "get your things on and we'll start at once. No need to waste any time over my part of the show."

He piloted them to a 'bus, where, by reason of his pushfulness, they obtained front seats. Slowly they made their way citywards. As they drew near the Mansion House, the blocks in the traffic grew more frequent. They became jammed in a medley of vehicles. The pavements were crowded with streams of hurrying men, with here and there a few girls and young women. Matthew pointed downwards.

"There you are," he said, "there's one thing I brought you here to show you. You've watched the people pass through the streets in Norchester. They just look as though they were going to any old place, and it didn't matter a row of pins when they got there or what they did when they arrived. Now look at the faces of these people. They've got something else written there, every one of them, men and women alike. I'm not much of a hand at this sort of job, but you can see what I mean, can't you?"

"They're out for something definite," Philip declared.

"That's right," Matthew assented approvingly. "They're seekers. They've either got jobs that they want to push along with, or they're all in a hurry to shoulder some one else out of the way and climb another notch in the ladder. You see that, Philip? And you, Rosina?"

"Absolutely!" they both agreed.

"Now let's get off, then," Matthew suggested. "I'll show you where my gods are enshrined."

They walked down Threadneedle and Lombard streets, and Matthew rolled off the names on the brass plates with amazing familiarity.

"Here they are," he pointed out. "The men in the

bank parlours are the governors of the world to-day. It's a place in there I covet. I don't want to sit in a row behind the plate-glass windows, but back in the private room, with a Turkey carpet beneath my feet, a mahogany desk before me, and half a dozen telephones by my side. I want my private secretary to enter the room on tiptoe — will I see an emissary from the Governors of the Bank of England? — a financial secretary to the Treasury is waiting — the greatest of American millionaires is anxious for me to lunch with him! Come along this way."

He led them to the front of the Stock Exchange. Rosina and Philip looked with amazement at the surging crowds of well-dressed men. The thrill of money-making was in the air. The shadow of unwholesome anxiety seemed lurking in the faces of the men who streamed in and out of the great building.

"These are the parasites," Matthew continued, a little contemptuously, "the slaves of the men who sit in the bank parlours of the world. Some day I shall pull the strings, and who cares to may watch the faces."

They turned away. Matthew walked apart for a few moments in absorbed silence. He was as nearly moved as ever they had seen him.

"Well," he said at last, "I have had my turn. Now you can be guide, Philip."

They took a 'bus as far as Fleet Street. Here they got out and walked slowly down the thronged thoroughfare.

"For me it is more difficult to reach the concrete," Philip expounded, "but here, on either side of us, are the newspaper offices of the country. If you listen, you can hear the roar of the machinery above the sound of the traffic. The written word of the cleverest men whom the genius of selection can bring together is being flung into

type to carry its message all over the world. Somewhere up in those quieter rooms, shut off from the world by green baize doors and jealous secretaries, men sit and think. Imagine their power! The word that flows from their pen will fashion the thought of to-morrow. They let loose the dogs of war or hold them in. The power of your men in the bank parlours is great enough, Matthew, but what about these? They direct the thought of the world. The men in the bank parlours can only change its temporal fortunes."

"The Press is a great power," Matthew acknowledged tolerantly. "Broadly speaking, there is reason in what you say, but the financial papers themselves can be bought or sold. Lombard Street has only to stretch out its hand, dripping with gold, and their leading articles become nothing more nor less than advertisements."

"The financial papers are out of my scheme," Philip objected. "They do not belong to the Press proper. Come, this is only the first phase," he added. "Now for the corollary."

He led them, breathless and a little protesting, to the top of the Monument. London stretched out below them in great arteries, thoroughfares and bridges crowded with human beings and traffic.

"There the world goes," Philip said, leaning down absorbedly, "moving according to plan. Who set it going no one can say; who will stop it no one can tell. Wagons and lorries, tradesmen's carts and costers' barrows, taxicabs, automobiles and pedestrians — they are all bound for some definite rendezvous, all part of the great scheme of life."

"Not too much philosophising, please, Philip," Rosina begged, passing her arm through his.

"I don't want to philosophise at all," Philip rejoined. "I want to understand."

Matthew was a little contemptuous, wholly unsympathetic.

"What's the good of bothering about other people?" he asked bluntly. "I don't care a hang where all these crowds are going to, or what they are thinking about. I want to get at my own job, and get on with it as quickly as ever I can."

"You may get on with your own job better for understanding theirs," Philip replied. "It isn't apparent, I know, but they are all making their way down different avenues to one common end. Directly one understands that, one has sympathy, and directly one has sympathy, one begins to feel, one is conscious of the power which is only born with feeling."

Matthew was frankly bored. Philip was almost eagerly apologetic as they descended once more into the crowded thoroughfare.

"I know this sort of thing isn't much in your line, old fellow," he said, passing his arm through Matthew's, "and, of course, the silly way I express myself must make it all sound like bunkum. But there's something underneath which I can't quite get at. It's stirring there, though, and it's going to help me. I shall write stories, Matthew, and believe me, my dear commercial soul, the man in the street will buy them. Sometimes, even the people who understand cannot write. The people who crave to understand, however, nearly always can. The desire is the great thing."

"My chief desire at present," Matthew declared, looking at his watch, "is for luncheon."

They found a place close at hand, carefully selected by Matthew, who ordered the luncheon and checked each item on the bill before he paid. He then collected their shares from his two companions, and they sallied out into the street again.

"Now it's my turn!" Rosina exclaimed. "I shall probably shock you both. I am going to show you what a pagan I really am."

She took them to Bond Street and dragged them from shop window to shop window. Her face lit up as she discoursed to them of silks and laces, of Paris models, of pearls and Cartier's jewellery. She studied with frank envy the beautifully gowned women whom they passed. Once, lingering in front of a shop window, she began to laugh and pointed to their reflections.

"I wonder what Bond Street is thinking of us!" she exclaimed. "Don't let us ever forget our first appearance here!"

There was a certain quaintness about the trio, and certainly more than one passer-by turned to look at them. Both the young men were wearing ready-made suits of Norchester design, Philip a soft collar and tweed cap, Matthew a carefully-brushed bowler hat. There was something about them suggestive of the Saturday morning crowd poured into London from the north to witness a Football Final. Yet, at the same time, they each possessed something apart from the class to which their clothes and obvious lack of familiarity with their surroundings would seem to relegate them. Matthew's claims to originality consisted in his stolid but unobtrusive self-assurance, and the suggestion of power in his obstinate jaw and firm lips; Philip's in his Byronic type of face, his nervous features and restless eyes. Rosina, walking between the two, presented even more puzzling anomalies. Her primly fashioned, homely clothes were powerless to conceal the grace of her young limbs and body. Her girlish, almost childish air of delight in her surroundings, her soft, eager laughter, her complete absence of any form of self-consciousness, all lent an unanalysable distinction to her more obvious attractive-

ness. Passers-by turned to look after her, puzzled. The modern boulevardier found himself at fault. There was no place in his classification of the other sex for anything so entirely ingenuous and yet so charming.

"And now," Rosina declared, as they reached Piccadilly again, after having traversed both sides of Bond Street, "I am going to redeem myself a little. Come along."

She took them to the National Gallery, and again her selective instinct was almost as true as her perception for the slighter things. She revelled in many of the pictures and much of the statuary, Philip sharing to some extent her enthusiasm. She was frankly indifferent to some of the world's masterpieces, but she made no mistake in what really appealed to her. Their visit was cut short owing to Matthew's impatience. She passed her arm through his as they stood upon the steps, looking down over Trafalgar Square.

"Matthew dear," she said, "if this is boring you, I'm sorry, but I somehow feel that to-day is going to be a very important day for all of us. We have grown up together, we three. We have suffered together. This is our first day of freedom. We are all going to strike out along different paths, and I feel that, unless we understand one another, we may very soon drift a long way apart. I suppose I'm terribly frivolous because the greatest passion I feel, just now, is the love of beautiful things, but I'm trying to show you — it isn't for the body only — there's the mind and the soul, too. Come, we're going down on the Embankment now. I want to sit and look at Westminster Abbey, and see the tugs go down the river under the bridges."

They spent a desultory hour or so wandering along the Embankment, having tea at a coffee stall, watching the circling gulls and the haze on the other side of the

water. The brilliancy of the summer day passed early away, little patches of white mist hung, shroudlike, over the higher stretches of the river. The sun was obscured, an oppressive heat seemed to rise from the baked pavements. There seemed to be no breath of air anywhere. Over the city, the yellow bank of clouds parted once or twice to reveal the lurid glory of a blaze of sheet lightning. Matthew rose to his feet.

"I think we'll be moving along," he suggested. "There's a storm not far away, and we haven't an umbrella between us. If we get wet through, our clothes will be spoilt."

They moved up the Savoy Hill and were caught in the stream of vehicles turning into the Savoy courtyard. A few spots of rain were falling. Rosina clutched at the arms of her two companions and dragged them up to the sheltered end, near the Theatre. They watched the people arriving — Matthew with a certain stolid interest at the display of so much wealth and luxury, Philip with half-amused, half-wistful curiosity, Rosina with a pleasure which was almost passionate in its intensity. The women looked at their best in the zephyrlike clothing of a summer night; the men, with their dazzling shirt fronts and glossy silk hats, seemed to belong to a world in which Norchester had no part. Through the great plateglass windows, they could catch a glimpse of the *maîtres d'hôtel* moving about, ushering guests to their tables. From the restaurant far below, they could hear, now and then, the strains of music. Rosina clung to her two companions.

"Philip," she murmured breathlessly, "Matthew — we must hurry — we must get on quickly! You, Matthew, must make money. You, Philip, must get your stories published. I want to come here and dance with you both, and I want you to have clothes like these men, and I want

to have a white lace dress like that girl who has just gone in, with white silk stockings and silver shoes, and a cloud of ermine all over me."

Philip laughed indulgently.

"The day my first novel is published," he promised, "we will all dine here."

"Before six months have passed," Matthew declared, "I shall lunch at that table by the window. In a year's time, I shall dine here whenever I choose."

CHAPTER V

Rosina, alone in the sitting room at Maltby Street, bending over her typewriter, in the manipulation of which, after seven months' continual practice, she was now entirely proficient, paused suddenly to listen, with her fingers in the air. There was a step outside. The door was opened without ceremony. With a quick effort, she kept the expression of disappointment from her face. It was Matthew who entered.

"Working late, aren't you?" he remarked, glancing at the pile of manuscript by her side.

"A little later than usual," she assented.

"Where's dinner?" he demanded, looking at the unlaid table.

"I wonder if you would mind very much, Matthew," she suggested uneasily, "if we went out to get something to eat to-night? If we go to a very cheap place, there isn't much difference, is there, and — "

"And what?" Matthew insisted.

"Well, I haven't been out to the shops to buy anything," she explained. "Somehow or other, the time slipped away."

"Have you got any money to buy anything with, Rosina?" he asked bluntly.

"Not much," she admitted.

Matthew slowly removed his overcoat and hung it over the back of a chair. It was quite a well-cut garment, and came from the same tailor as the conventional but well-cut city clothes which he was wearing. He dragged a chair across to the table.

"Let's have a look at the book," he invited.

A little flush of colour stole into Rosina's pale cheeks.

"I'm afraid it isn't quite made up," she confessed.

"You may as well show it to me," he persisted. "I can pretty well guess how things are."

Rosina opened a drawer and handed it reluctantly across to him — a small black account book which she had purchased with great pride seven months ago. Matthew drew a pencil from his pocket and glanced rapidly through the pages. He was silent for several moments, then he laid it down.

"Has all Philip's money gone?" he enquired.

"Every penny of it," Rosina answered.

"And yours?"

"When I have paid my share up to last Saturday," she admitted, "all mine will have gone, too."

He glanced back at the book.

"Philip has paid nothing for four weeks," he observed.

"Nothing at all."

"That means," he continued ruthlessly, "that you and I have been supporting him."

"Don't!" she begged. "Philip will pay us back. He is sure to have a story accepted presently."

"I am beginning to doubt it," Matthew replied. "In the meantime, it will be Saturday again directly. Philip will have nothing to contribute to the book. What about you?"

Her head disappeared for a moment between her hands.

"I shall only have fifteen shillings," she sighed. "I have to pay for the hire of the typewriter, and they charge me for the paper and the carbons and everything. I worked till two o'clock this morning, Matthew. It seems hopeless to try and make enough to live on by copying alone."

Matthew sat with knitted brows, drumming on the table with his fingers.

"Where is Philip now?" he asked.

"Out somewhere," she answered, a little drearily. "He took two of his stories round to show to the editor of a new magazine some one had told him about."

Matthew's silence was ominous. She looked anxiously across the table towards him, trying to read his thoughts. His face was inscrutable.

"Matthew," she went on, "you won't mind, will you, if Philip and I are a little behind for a week or two? Philip must sell some stories soon. They really are good, Matthew. The one he wrote last week is wonderful. And I'll try and get something else to do instead of this typing — something they pay more money for."

Matthew rose slowly to his feet.

"Have you had anything to eat to-day, Rosina?" he demanded.

"Some tea and bread and butter for lunch," she answered. "But I'm not hungry," she added eagerly. "I am really not hungry. I don't seem to need much food."

"Was Philip here for lunch?"

"Yes, he was here," she admitted. "Mrs. Heath sent up what she called one portion of some sort of beef. Philip said it wasn't bad. I couldn't touch it."

"Put on your hat," Matthew directed. "You and I will go out and get some dinner."

"What about Philip?" she asked hesitatingly.

"Leave a note for him, if you want to," was the indifferent reply.

"But Philip has no money," she reminded him, "and Mrs. Heath won't let us have anything unless it is paid for. You can see by the book that I haven't quite settled last week's account."

Matthew, with obvious reluctance, produced a shilling.

"You can leave this with the note," he said. "Get ready at once, please. I didn't have beef for lunch, and I like my dinner punctually."

"I won't be a moment," she promised. "Don't be cross, there's a dear, Matthew. I'm so glad we're going out."

She crossed the room as lightly and gracefully as ever, and he heard the door of her own little chamber close behind her. He walked up and down the room with his hands in his pockets, picked up the account book again, looked through it with renewed care, and threw it back on the table with a gesture of irritation. Then he glanced at the scrap of paper which Rosina had left for Philip, and read her message:

> Philip, dear, I am going out to have some dinner with Matthew. He is very hungry and doesn't want to wait. You won't mind, will you? I'm afraid I have been extravagant this week and there's only a shilling to spare.
>
> We'll be back soon and I'll try and get some coffee.
>
> Love, dear,
> from
> Rosina.

He replaced the note with a frown. Rosina returned, a moment or two later, humming a gay tune and buttoning some very much darned gloves. She was wearing the grey costume in which she had travelled up to London in the early summer months. Matthew looked at her critically.

"You can't go out like that," he protested. "There's an east wind, and it's cold enough for snow. Where's your coat?"

"Gone to be altered," she replied, examining her glove closely. "I'm not a bit cold, really."

He put on his own warm overcoat, drew on his gloves and stroked the nap of his hat thoughtfully.

"Where is your coat, Rosina?" he asked.

She made a grimace at him.

"Don't be melodramatic, Matthew," she begged, "and don't look at me as though I were some sort of starving heroine. My coat's pawned, if you must know."

"Tell me about it," he insisted.

"There's nothing to tell. You were out to dinner last night. Philip and I were starving and we had exactly two-pence between us. It was an awful joke, really, and I don't want a coat with the spring coming on."

"What about Philip's own coat?"

A spot of colour flamed in her cheeks, her eyes flashed.

"Don't be absurd, Matthew!" she exclaimed. "You know how bad Philip's cough is, and his clothes are much thinner than mine."

"Get the ticket," he ordered.

"Matthew," she begged, "don't be angry with me."

"I am not angry — with you," he answered. "Please get the ticket."

She obeyed, and they descended the stairs in silence. During their progress to the corner of the street which she indicated, she shivered more than once. They entered the shop. Matthew put down a Treasury note and the coat was produced. Rosina wrapped herself up in it and her eyes shone with gratitude as she looked up at her companion.

"After all," she confessed, "I think that I was a little cold."

The evening was full of surprises for Rosina. For the first time since their arrival in London, she rode in a taxicab, sitting close to her companion, her arm through

his, and thoroughly enjoying their progress through the lighted streets. It was not until they had reached the Strand and had turned into the Savoy courtyard, however, that she had the faintest idea as to their destination. She drew back at once.

"Matthew," she exclaimed, horrified, "I couldn't possibly go in there! Look at my clothes!"

"Leave it to me," he answered. "There is a grill-room, where one does not wear evening dress. I was there for luncheon, and I told them that I should probably be dining. Just leave it to me."

Before she knew where she was, they had entered the wonderful building by a side door, and she found herself at once in an atmosphere of warmth and luxury. She waited whilst her companion handed his coat and hat to a bowing *vestiaire*, and in a sort of dream she followed him into the restaurant, preceded by a smiling and beckoning *maître d'hôtel*. They were ushered to a table which Matthew indicated, in a retired corner of the room.

"No one will look at you here," he assured her, as they took their places. "All sorts of people come in at this time of the day — actresses from rehearsals, secretaries with their employers, travelling Americans who are in a hurry to get round the world and have no time to change. If you get hot, take off your coat and hang it across the back of a chair. For the rest, leave everything to me and enjoy your dinner."

Rosina was a most appreciative guest. She gloried in the warmth and luxury of the room, the general atmosphere of well-being, the delicate food, the champagne which she tasted for the first time. She looked in almost awed wonder at her companion.

"Matthew," she asked, "how can you possibly afford this?"

"I have never done anything in my life which I could

not afford," he answered, truthfully enough. "To-day I lunched here with my employer. I came in, a salaried servant at two hundred and fifty a year — even that represents three increases in six months — and I went out with a thousand a year for certain, and the prospect of a partnership."

She could only murmur something incomprehensible. The figures dazzled her. The whole thing was too astonishing.

"I have brought you here, Rosina," he went on, "to talk to you seriously. I am sorry for Philip, but it is perfectly clear that his idea of making money by writing stories is absurd. He cannot hold his own up here; neither can you by yourself. You can see exactly what the position is. Your earnings have been insufficient to keep you, and you have spent all your capital. I am the only one keeping up his payments. If I were to go on, I should soon be supporting the pair of you."

"You are going to leave us?" she faltered, in genuine distress.

"I certainly am," he agreed. "In a very short time, I shall have a definite position in the city, and I shall have to commence to make my way in other directions. Maltby Street is of no use to me at all. I have looked at some rooms to-day in the neighbourhood of St. James's Street. I shall move in there next week. You can come there with me, if you like — but not Philip."

"But not Philip?" she repeated, a little dazed. "Why, what is he to do, then?"

"That is not my business," Matthew replied. "I must tell you frankly, Rosina, that I am not proposing to cumber myself with a kindergarten. I will take care of you — you need not do any work at all unless you like — but I am certainly not prepared to support Philip."

She looked across the table at him with horrified eyes.

"You are going to leave us — you would have me leave him — just now, when he needs help most?" she protested. "Matthew, tell me that you don't mean it? You are spoiling everything."

"I was never more serious in my life," he assured her stolidly. "Our triangular housekeeping is at an end. I start life under new auspices within the next few days. You can come with me, if you like, and a great deal that you prayed for when we left Norchester may in time come your way. Or you can stay with Philip, and either starve or find your way to the workhouse within the next few weeks."

The light seemed to have died out of her face, the warmth of the wine from her veins. She shivered as though she were again feeling the cold.

"I cannot leave Philip," she said gently. "I would not if I could. He needs me now more than he will at any time in life."

"It is possible," Matthew declared, in measured tones, "that I am in the same position. It is for you to choose."

She leaned back in her chair. In a sense, the world — her small world — seemed to be tumbling to pieces around her. Her thoughts flashed back to Norchester, to the sunny afternoon when the wind had made music in the rustling cornfields and the pine trees under which they had lain and planned their revolt. It was little more than six months ago, but an unsuspected shadow had crept into the world. She felt the change without being fully able to understand it.

"I will tell you a little more about what happened today," Matthew went on, misjudging Rosina's hesitation. "I dare say you remember what I was always telling Uncle Benjamin about his factory and his method of running it."

"You thought him behind the times," she murmured.

"Ridiculously! What I could foresee then is coming to pass more rapidly even than I had imagined. The business of Benjamin Stone and Company is going to the wall. They have lost their trade. Soon they will lose their credit. I begin to understand now why he kept his private ledger under such strict lock and key. He must have been losing money for years. It is my belief that he will be a bankrupt before the year is out."

Rosina was amazed.

"But I thought he was so wealthy," she gasped.

"He had plenty of money at one time," Matthew admitted, "but there are few capitalists who can stand the drain of a losing business. Benjamin Stone is racing downhill. What there is good that remains in his business, I offered to Mr. Faringdon to-day."

"But how could you do that?" she demanded.

"Very easily," was the complacent reply. "When I left Norchester, I brought with me a complete list of the firm's customers, the goods they bought, the price they paid, and the costings of every boot and shoe manufactured. I also had a list of the raw material purchased, with special notes against all that was satisfactory. The only traveller the firm ever possessed who was of the slightest use to them I engaged a month ago on behalf of my present firm. When Benjamin Stone and Company go broke, as they must do before very long, we shall purchase the business, install the necessary machinery, and I have promised to take over the management of it for at least twelve months."

"Poor Uncle Benjamin!" she sighed.

"I never knew a man less deserving of pity," her companion rejoined curtly. "Now, Rosina," he went on, "I want you to make up your mind. It comes to this. You have to choose between Philip and me. I can give you a

great deal of what you want in life. Philip can give you nothing."

The shadow of that unformed trouble which had never wholly passed came back into her face.

"But, Matthew," she expostulated, "how can I leave Philip?"

"He has no more claim upon you than I have," was the brusque reply.

Rosina shook her head.

"I am not so sure about that, Matthew," she told him. "We have not talked about it very much, because it seems rather a mockery just now, but I think that it is understood between us that some day, when his books are published and these evil times are over, we are going to be married."

"His novels will never be published," Matthew declared. "Philip is of no account. I have watched him in the factory and in the office, making a daily muddle of the simplest jobs. If you want the silks and laces of Bond Street, Rosina, you will never get them from him."

"Then I will do without them," she replied valiantly.

Matthew called for the bill, tipped the waiter liberally, and also the *maître d'hôtel*. His liberality, like his meanness, was of the measured order. Even during these first few months in London, he was building all the time for bigger things. To spend a purposeless sixpence which at no time could bring him any return, was an agony to him. A Treasury note given to a *maître d'hôtel* with influence, he thought nothing of — it was an investment which was to return him value later on.

"It is possible," he remarked, as they left the room together, "that in my conversation with you I have been a little premature. You still have faith in Philip. I have none. I shall remove my things from Maltby Street

to-morrow morning, but I shall leave you my address. I think that you will probably change your mind. There will always be room for you in Bury Street."

"I shall never change my mind," she assured him. "I think that I am one of those women who have inherited the fatal gift of fidelity. I am very fond indeed of Philip."

"Affection needs some solid foundation," Matthew rejoined stubbornly. "Philip has no stamina, nothing whatever to build upon. He will disappoint you and make you miserable. Some day you will come to Bury Street."

They drove back to their lodgings in another taxicab, almost in silence. As they neared their journey's end, Matthew took off his hat, placed it carefully upon the opposite seat and leaned towards her.

"Rosina," he said, "I should like a kiss."

"Why, my dear Matthew," she exclaimed, "you kiss me every night when you want to! But why choose a taxicab when we shall be in the sitting room in a moment?"

"Philip will be there," he answered grimly.

"But Philip is always there," she protested. "However, have it your own way."

She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. He suddenly caught her by the shoulders, turned her towards him and kissed her lips. She drew away, trembling. The shadow had deepened. She was suddenly in the dark forest of ugly places. She felt his eyes following her — cold, burning eyes. She began to rub her lips unconsciously.

"Matthew," she faltered breathlessly, "you are very rough and a little cruel. No one has ever kissed me like that before. I dislike it. Will you please remember that?"

"I shall remember," he promised, "so long as I think well."

Rosina ran on ahead up the steep stairs. When she reached their tawdry little sitting room, which not even her eager hands had been able to make attractive, she found Philip asleep on the horsehair sofa. By his side was the note she had written. The shilling remained on the corner of the table, untouched. There was a faint smell of spirits in the atmosphere, a smell which Rosina had already learned to loathe.

CHAPTER VI

Matthew entered in the midst of Rosina's almost tearful remonstrances. He drew off his overcoat, looking all the time at Philip with an air of disfavour. Philip, as a matter of fact, was not looking his best. His collar was soiled, his tie had wandered to one side, his clothes were crumpled and his hair unkempt. He seemed thinner than ever, and the single spot of colour in his cheeks was certainly not healthy. Yet there was a sort of grace about him as, with his elbow on the back of the sofa and his head resting upon his hand, he listened with a smile, half-apologetic and half-conciliatory, to Rosina's remonstrances.

"It's really no good being angry with me," he said. "I walked all the way down to the other side of Fleet Street to see a fellow who knows an editor. We went to several wine shops together to try and find him. My friend stood me two drinks. I'd rather he'd paid for something to eat, but I couldn't mention it, could I?"

"Why didn't you go out and get something when you reached home?" Rosina protested.

Philip looked at the shilling.

"That doesn't belong to me," he said. "My money has gone."

"I never heard such nonsense!" she exclaimed.

"It is not nonsense," Matthew intervened, lighting a cigarette. "The matter has to be faced. I have been looking into the accounts this evening. Your capital has gone, Philip — so has Rosina's. I am the only one who has paid all his share towards the housekeeping for the

last three weeks, and I understand that Mrs. Heath has not been fully paid."

"What are you going to do about it?" Philip asked curiously.

"I am going to leave you," Matthew announced. "I am going to move into more suitable rooms in Bury Street to-morrow. I have been telling Rosina of my intention."

"Very wise of you," Philip observed sarcastically. "You might have been stuck for next week's rent."

"I shall pay my share of that, as I am leaving without notice, and that will be the end of my responsibility," Matthew rejoined. "Before I go, however, there is just a word I have to say."

"Get on with it," Philip invited.

"You have been in London seven months," Matthew proceeded deliberately, "during which time you have spent the whole of your savings. You have earned nothing. Consequently, you are at the moment penniless. Rosina has also spent her savings, although she, unlike you, has earned a trifle which has gone towards your support. We agreed to start life together, but we are in no sense of the word partners. I am leaving you to-morrow. How do you propose to live?"

The pent-up fury of months broke loose in Philip.

"What the hell business is that of yours?" he demanded.

"So far as you are concerned," was the cold reply, "it is neither my business nor my concern. There is Rosina, however, to be considered."

"Philip — Matthew — " she implored, turning to each in turn, "please don't let us quarrel. It isn't worth it. Matthew is quite right to go, if he feels that he must. We shall get along somehow."

"I shall be curious to know how," Matthew observed.

Philip slid from the sofa on to his feet, and stood by

Rosina's side. He glowered at Matthew across the table.

"Damn you and your curiosity!" he exclaimed. "We sha'n't ask you for alms, anyhow."

"So far as you are concerned," Matthew assured him, "I should refuse you if you did. If ever you should come to your senses and be willing to start work at the bottom, as a junior clerk in a commercial house, I would do my best to find you a post. I should do this for you for old association's sake, but somewhat against my principles. As regards Rosina, the matter is different. If she chooses to come with me, she can have the shelter of my flat and food when she requires it. I have no doubt that she will be able to earn enough for her clothes, if she has only herself to think of."

A deep flush stained Philip's cheek. For a moment it seemed as though he would have sprung at his persecutor. Rosina linked her arm in his.

"Matthew, you are horrid!" she exclaimed indignantly. "Philip will soon be earning far more than I ever could. I am only too proud if I can help until that time comes."

Matthew shrugged his shoulders.

"You must make your own choice, Rosina," he said. "If you come with me, you certainly will not starve, you will have a roof over your head, and you will not need to pawn your clothes. If you decide to stay with Philip — well, God help you both!"

Rosina still clung to Philip.

"I dare say your offer is more kindly meant than it sounds, so I will thank you for it, Matthew," she declared. "Nothing, however, would induce me to leave Philip. I shall stay with him until he sends me away."

There was nothing in Matthew's face or manner to suggest that he was disappointed. He had at no time adopted any other tone than one of condescending invita-

tion. Yet his silence was, in a way, ominous. He looked at the two for a moment with an unfathomable expression. Then he turned away and rang the bell.

"What's that for?" Philip demanded.

"I am going to have Mrs. Heath up," Matthew replied, "and acquit myself of all responsibility here. The flat I have taken is a service flat, and I entered into possession to-day. After I have explained matters to Mrs. Heath, I shall pack my bag and move in."

"Must you hurry away like this?" Rosina pleaded, a little timidly. "There are some socks of yours I haven't finished darning, and —"

"You can come round to my rooms and finish them whenever you like," Matthew interrupted. "My address will be 130a Bury Street."

Mrs. Heath bustled into the room. She was a thin, nervous woman, with a hard face, plentifully lined, and little untidy wisps of grey hair which seemed to defy restraint. She held her head a little on one side when she was listening, and she generally stood with her hands hanging down in front of her. It was understood that she had once been in service as a lady housekeeper.

"Mrs. Heath," Matthew began, "I must apologise for disturbing you at this hour, but there is a little matter I should like to put straight with you."

"It's a cruel number of stairs just to answer a bell," Mrs. Heath complained, "but I am here."

"My two friends and I are parting company," Matthew continued. "I have paid my rent up to last Saturday. I now wish to pay you my share until Saturday week, as I am leaving without notice."

Mrs. Heath extended her hand for the money which Matthew was counting out — a greedy hand, with bony fingers and big knuckles.

"If you paid for last week, I haven't had the money, sir," she declared anxiously.

"Then you must settle with these two," Matthew said. "I have paid my share, and that is an end of it so far as I am concerned. I am leaving to-night. You have no further claim upon me."

"I'm not so sure about that," she grumbled. "It's a sudden business, this, to throw the rooms on my hands."

"But we are staying," Rosina interposed. "Mr. Garth and I will keep the rooms on — except Mr. Garner's, of course."

Mrs. Heath coughed.

"Is the young gentleman in regular work, might I ask," she enquired, "or you, miss?"

Rosina checked the impatient exclamation which had sprung to Philip's lips.

"Mr. Garth is an author," she explained. "He does not need a regular post to be earning money. As you know, I have a little coming in for my typing."

"Could you make it convenient to settle for last week?" the landlady persisted.

Rosina shook her head.

"Not to-night, Mrs. Heath," she confessed.

Mrs. Heath took a gloomy view of the situation.

"I likes my lodgers," she announced, "to be in regular work — so much a week coming in for certain — and then we all knows where we are. But putting that aside, miss, may I ask if you and the young gentleman were thinking of living on here alone together like?"

"Of course," Rosina answered, with wide-open eyes. "Mr. Garner has just told you that he is going."

Mrs. Heath's cough appeared to become more troublesome.

"Without wishing to make myself in any way unpleasant," she said, "I simply puts it to you that you can't

have the rooms. Mine's a respectable lodging house, and always has been."

Rosina was genuinely bewildered.

"But whatever do you mean, Mrs. Heath?" she exclaimed. "We are perfectly respectable people. We can get references, if you like."

"It isn't a matter of references," was the dogged reply. "I don't wish to make insinuations, being an honest and a careful woman myself, but I just tell you both that I can't let the rooms to a young man and young woman who aren't married, and, so far as I know, aren't thinking of it."

There was a curious silence in the room. Mrs. Heath, utterly ignorant of the thunderbolt which she had launched, began to back towards the door. Matthew, with sinister interest, watched the other two. Rosina had the air of a child whom something has terrified. For the second time that evening, a jarring chord had disturbed her serenity. Some one had intruded brutally and insistently into the most secret chambers of her consciousness. She looked a little timidly, a little helplessly, towards Philip. Then her head disappeared in her hands. This was not a battle which she could wage. Philip, to whom Mrs. Heath's attitude was less amazing but quite as unexpected, did his best to pull himself together.

"Look here," he protested stormily, "this is all nonsense! Miss Vonet and I were brought up together in the same house. We have lived like brother and sister always — the three of us have, in fact."

Mrs. Heath had reached the door. With her fingers upon the handle, she felt quite brave.

"I'm not one for insinuations, sir, as I said before," she concluded, "but I don't choose to let my rooms to a young lady and gentleman sharing a common sitting room, that aren't related. And Saturday will suit me, and if

it could be Friday, to get a bit of cleaning done, I'd be glad. Good night, all!"

Mrs. Heath closed the door behind her and descended the stairs. Rosina's courage, proof against any ordinary disaster, seemed for the moment to have deserted her. She threw herself into the easy-chair and buried her face, still hidden by her hands, in the cushion. Philip had moved a little closer to Matthew.

"Look here, Matthew," he said, "when you asked Mrs. Heath to come up, had you any idea of what she might say?"

"I certainly did not think that she would consider you two very desirable lodgers," was the sneering reply.

Philip came a little nearer still.

"That isn't the point, damn you!" he continued. "We're a couple of babes in the wood, I suppose, but the other thing hadn't occurred to us. Had it occurred to you?"

"Yes," Matthew admitted.

"Then what did you mean when you asked Rosina to come and share your flat?" Philip demanded.

There was another silence. Rosina, who had been listening, raised her head. Her eyes, too, filled with dawning horror, were fixed upon Matthew. The pent-up sobs which had been shaking her body suddenly ceased.

"That is my business," Matthew answered slowly.

"You have made it mine!" Philip cried furiously, striking the first blow of his peace-loving life.

Matthew had reeled against the wall but saved himself from falling. He stood for a moment wiping the blood from the corner of his mouth. He made no effort to return the blow, nor did Philip repeat it. Presently he hung his overcoat over his arm, picked up his hat and left the room, without a glance at either of them. Philip, who had been standing with clenched fists, watching him,

listened until the sound of his retreating footsteps died away. Then he turned towards Rosina. In her eyes he seemed suddenly glorified. His passionate action, although subsequently, in her saner moments, she believed it ill-deserved, had somehow purged away the ugliness of the moment. He was the Sir Galahad of her dreams, on fire to stamp out the shadow of evil for her sake. She held out her arms and Philip sank down by her side. A species of exaltation was upon him.

"Dear Rosina," he whispered, "I hadn't meant to say a word yet — not until I had done something in the world — not until I had something to offer you. And now I can't help it. Perhaps it is the one thing needed to keep me going, to give me faith and hope."

Her arms held him tighter. They were both very young for the love which gathered them into its marvellous keeping — hers, in those early moments, perhaps, something of the mother love that desires to protect and encourage one a little weaker than herself. But it was very wonderful, and the magic of it lasted until they heard the bell of the Parish Church chiming the hour of eleven. Then Philip tore himself away, picked up his cap with a little laugh and showed her the shilling.

"For my night's lodging, sweetheart!" he exclaimed, as he made his way towards the door. "Wish me luck."

She called out after him, wanting to pack him a bag, reminding him of his sponges, pyjamas — all sorts of things he ought to have. There was no reply save the sound of his rapid footsteps descending the narrow stairs. She hurried to the window, watched him emerge from the shabby house, watched him cross the street. There was something new about him, new about his carriage, new about the way he held his head and swung his arms. Her heart beat with joy and pride as she looked downwards. For the first time, he was facing life like a victor.

CHAPTER VII

So, in the eighth month of their great enterprise, the enterprise which was to show them the whole earth and the glory thereof, the three were separated. Matthew flourished in his flat in Bury Street, and, subject to the ministrations of a vigilant valet, departed each day for the city, garbed and tended into the likeness of the class into whose ranks he was determined to pass. Philip found a top room in an old building in Adam Street, a steep climb, but an airy chamber with a three-cornered view of the river. Rosina procured a bedroom which was little better than a cubicle, in a working-girl's club, thereby achieving a disagreeable but obvious respectability. Philip, having at last run to earth his friend's friend, the editor, succeeded in selling him two stories and an article, and faced the world bravely with nine guineas, paid, after many protests, in advance of publication. Rosina, at the end of her second week, parted with her coat again, and, at the beginning of the fourth, decided to give up typewriting for ever. She had what Philip lacked — a singularly robust vein of common sense — and she faced the situation without alarm but at the same time seriously, absolutely determined that under no consideration whatever would she become a drag upon Philip. One by one, she enumerated and considered the various means by which a young woman of moderate ability and rather too prepossessing an appearance might make a living in London. She decided to apply for a position in an office, and, after a prolonged study of various advertisements, she started out one morning with a list in her hand. To a certain extent she was prepared to sacrifice her inde-

pendence. The idea of spending the day in an office was distasteful to her, but it was obviously inevitable. She put away regrets and faced the situation cheerfully.

On her way towards the first place on her list, she paused for a moment to look at the bills outside the Garrick Theatre. A forthcoming production was announced, and the front of the house was closed. A thin stream of girls and men was making its way down the flagged passage which led to the stage door, and she chanced to overhear the word "rehearsal." With a little laugh and a valiant instinct for adventure, she turned and followed them. As luck would have it, the doorkeeper's attention was momentarily engaged as she passed in single file, with several other girls, before his glass window. She followed them down a network of dark passages, past several doors on which cards were pinned, until she stood at last in what she realised must be the wings of the theatre. Here she had a few minutes in which to collect herself. A young man and a girl were standing in the middle of the stage. A short, olive-complexioned, fat personage, with jet-black hair, was walking around them, with a typescript in his hand, apparently on the brink of tears.

"Rotten!" he cried. "Absolutely rotten! You both enter as though you were walking on stilts, you both say the wrong thing in the wrong way. You, Eric, look like a poop-stick, and you, Madge, like a hairdresser's dummy. God help the play and all of us, I say! Unless you can put a little more life into it, you'll be booed off the stage on the first night."

Rosina, thoroughly enjoying herself, smiled at a pleasant-faced young man in tweeds, who was standing by her side, smoking a cigarette.

"Are these two really so bad," she enquired, "or is it the play?"

"Well, it's scarcely fair to ask me," he replied, "as I happen to be the author."

Rosina, who was becoming an opportunist, did not hesitate for a moment.

"Are you really the author?" she murmured, raising her eyes and looking at him. "How wonderful!"

The young man changed his position a little. He seemed slightly embarrassed.

"Oh, I don't know about that!" he observed deprecatingly. "This sort of thing isn't really difficult to write."

"I heard the little fat man say something about a chorus," she went on, dropping her voice a little and looking at him confidentially. "Do you think I could possibly find a place in it?"

He looked at her in surprise.

"Aren't you in the show?" he asked.

"Not yet," she answered hopefully.

"Then what the dickens are you doing here?"

"I just saw the others coming in and I followed," she explained. "I was on my way to apply for a post at a fruit shop, at two pounds ten a week. I would so much rather go on the stage."

The young man turned and studied her attentively. After all, she decided, he was not quite so young as she had thought at first. He was a little freckled and very much sunburnt, clean-shaven, bald on the top of his head, with humorous mouth and kindly grey eyes. She liked him quite well enough to endure his scrutiny and to smile back at him.

"Sure you're not getting at me?" he demanded. "You're not a leading ingénue in disguise, or anything of that sort?"

"Nothing of the kind," she assured him. "I am a poor but honest girl, seeking to make a respectable living."

The rehearsal was in full swing now. The young man called to his confederate who had been coaching the unhappy pair.

"Sam," he said, "a word with you."

Sam strolled over, fanning himself with the script he was carrying.

"No use pitching into me, Duggie, old chap," he began, deprecatingly. "I'll teach them their job in time, but it's damned slow work."

"I don't want to pitch into you," was the prompt reply. "Is your chorus full up?"

"Abso-bally-lutely!"

Rosina's heart fell like a stone. Her hopes rose again, however, a moment later.

"Then just forget it," the author enjoined firmly. "Sam, old fellow, as a pal, couldn't you run another one in?"

"Oh, my God, Douglas!" the stage manager groaned. "Where is it? Let me know the worst!"

"The worst, in this case, is the best," was the cheerful rejoinder. "Sam, shake hands with Miss — er — Miss — er —"

"Miss Vonet," Rosina intervened. "How do you do, Mr. Sam? I hope you'll let me come into the chorus, and that you won't be as cross with me as you were with those people just now."

The stage manager shook hands, coldly at first but with increasing warmth. Rosina had looked at him.

"Duggie," he remonstrated, "why didn't you bring the young lady along before?"

"She's only just at liberty," the other explained. "Had hard work to persuade her to come into a rotten show like this."

"Better late than never, Miss Vonet," the stage manager declared. "Rehearsal at two-thirty this afternoon.

You get a fiver a week when we start, if we ever do. We find the clothes. Don't be late."

The author looked at his watch.

"Time we went and had some lunch, Miss Vonet," he suggested.

"But —"

"Grillroom at Ciro's," he interrupted. "I know what you're going to say—old clothes on, and all that. It doesn't matter a bit. Come along."

He led the way into the street. Rosina walked demurely by his side.

"Of course, I'm not going to refuse a perfectly good lunch," she said, "if you think it really doesn't matter about my terrible clothes. But will you kindly tell me if you really are the author of the play, and what it's all about?"

"My name is Douglas Erwen," he announced. "I am a New Yorker, although I am over on this side a good deal. To a certain extent I wrote the play, but it's one of those silly affairs, you know, with a skeleton plot, a slight book, plenty of songs and dances, and a dickens of a lot of gag. They call me the author," he went on meditatively. "I suppose I do supply them with an idea or two as a peg to hang the rest on. I certainly don't do more."

"What have I to do in the chorus?" Rosina enquired.

"Kind of go-as-you-please," Erwen assured her. "Stroll about most of the time in wonderful clothes, and make imaginary conversation with sticky-faced young men."

"I sha'n't like it," Rosina declared firmly.

"I never supposed you would," was the gloomy reply. "All the same, if you want to get on the stage, it's a start."

"It isn't the stage I'm so keen about," she confided. "It's the five pounds a week."

"Honest?"

She nodded.

"I've been earning fifteen shillings a week by typing," she told him. "I couldn't keep myself on it, so I've spent all my savings."

"Haven't you any home or relatives?" he asked curiously.

"None!"

"No friends?"

"One — a young man whom I am by way of being engaged to. He is very clever, but unfortunately he hasn't any money, either."

"Where do you live?"

"At a girls' hostel in Westminster. It costs just twenty-four shillings a week. When one's earnings are fifteen — well, living becomes rather a problem, doesn't it?"

They passed through the swing doors into the restaurant. The young man wrote his companion's name in a book, handed his stick and hat to an attendant, and led her down the stairs, past the bar, from which he was vociferously greeted by its various patrons, into a quaintly-decorated grillroom, where he ensconced Rosina at a corner table and took a seat beside her.

"Cocktail?" he enquired.

"I've never tasted one," she confessed. "I think I'd rather not, if you don't mind. I mustn't try too many new experiences in one day."

He ordered one for himself, consulted her taste as to the luncheon and selected some light wine. All the time he was studying her, unobtrusively and in quite friendly fashion.

"Say, are you used to lunching with perfect strangers?" he asked.

"I have never done it before," she assured him, "but then, you see, I have never met a real author who found me a place at five pounds a week and asked me out to lunch as well."

"We are not all to be trusted," he warned her. "Terrible fellows, some of us!"

She smiled into his face. When she smiled, Rosina was very beautiful.

"I should always trust you," she said.

"I hope you always may," he answered, without overmuch warmth in his tone. "Rather like putting one on honour, though, isn't it?"

"It is very good for you to be put on honour," she declared. — "What a wonderful omelette! Tell me, have you written many plays?"

"A fair number," he admitted. "Most of them have found their way over to this side, too. Don't tell me that you have never seen one of them!"

"Seen one of them?" she repeated, with a little laugh. "Why, I've only been in a theatre once in my life. It was one of Shakespeare's plays, and we had to leave early so that my uncle shouldn't find out."

"Say, you're not pulling my leg, are you?" he asked suspiciously.

"Everything I have told you has been the honest truth," she assured him.

"Where have you been living, then?"

"Norchester. Doesn't that explain it?"

"Somewhere up in the north, isn't it? But surely you came to London sometimes?"

"Never! My guardian was a strict Nonconformist."

"Look here," Erwen exclaimed, waving his hand across the room, "I must introduce you to Reggie! He looks

stupid but he isn't. You will see a lot of him at the theatre. He's putting up the money for the show. Hi, Reggie!"

A sleepy-looking young man, whose chief characteristics seemed to be a rather fat face, an unattached monocle and a friendly manner, strolled across to them.

"Want you to shake hands with Miss Vonet," Erwen declared. "Lord Reginald Towers — Miss Vonet. Miss Vonet has kindly consented to join the company at present rehearsing at the Garrick Theatre."

"In other words, she's in the show, what?" the newcomer observed, with some appearance of interest. "Good business! Where were you last, Miss Vonet? I haven't met you before, have I?"

"I come from Norchester," Rosina replied, "and I don't think you've ever been there."

"Norchester?" the young man repeated, a little vaguely. "One of those funny places up on the top side of the map, isn't it? I meant, what was your last show?"

"I have never been on the stage before," Rosina confided.

"Done any filming?"

"None."

"Absolute ingénue, what?" Lord Reginald remarked. "Very clever of Duggie to find you, I'm sure. Glad we're going to meet at the theatre, Miss Vonet. So long. I'm what you might call booked to lunch with the Lollipop sisters," he added, strolling off to join a little party at the other end of the room.

"My first meeting with a lord," Rosina reflected, gazing after the retreating figure with interest.

"He's none too bright a specimen of the genus, I'm afraid," Erwen remarked. "A good fellow enough in some respects, but a rotter with women. Keep him in his place, Miss Vonet, won't you?"

She laughed softly.

"What is his place?"

"A good arm's-length away from you, and then some," was the prompt reply.

"I'll remember it," she promised.

"He'll ask you to lunch," Erwen warned her.

"I won't go. That's real self-denial, for I don't often get a meal like this."

"You shall lunch with me as often as you like," he invited.

"How do I know that you are to be trusted?" she asked, smiling.

"You will discover that in time," he declared confidently. "Meanwhile, will you have some coffee?"

"Have I time?" she asked. "I don't want to be late."

He glanced at his watch.

"Plenty," he assured her, as he gave the order. "Now look here, Miss Vonet, let me give you a word of advice. Seriously, I think you will have had enough of the stage in a week or two, which is about as long as this thing will run, but in the meantime, be careful of them all across yonder. They're a little accustomed to take liberties with strangers, and they aren't a very understanding lot."

"I don't think any one is likely to take much notice of me, but I will be careful," Rosina promised, as she drank her coffee hurriedly. "Do you mind if I rush away now? I'm so anxious not to be late the first time. Don't bother to come upstairs with me, please," she added, as her companion showed signs of accompanying her. "You haven't finished your coffee yet. I can find my way quite well. And thank you once more for this wonderful lunch."

Erwen remained on his feet for a moment or two, watch-

ing her. Rosina, in spite of the privations of the last few months, seemed to have grown more beautiful every day since her arrival in London. Her complexion was exquisitely clear, and, with her slightly increased fragility, her eyes seemed to have grown larger and more lustrous. Not even her closely fitting hat — a very inexpensive little affair it was — could conceal the coils of silky, golden-brown hair; and, notwithstanding her shabby clothes and clumsy shoes, she carried herself with a quiet grace, an indefinable elegance, which attracted the attention of several of the lunchers seated at the tables around the door. She glanced back, smiled at Erwen, and went on her way unruffled. She thanked the man who pushed open the revolving door for her with such a smile that he looked after her, astonished. The smile lingered on her lips as she stepped out of the place and turned towards the theatre. She was on the threshold of adventure at last!

Back in the grillroom at Ciro's, Erwen was talking through the telephone to Sam Benson, the excitable little man whom he had introduced to Rosina.

"Look here, Sam," he said, "about that little girl I asked you to take on this morning. She's on her way over to rehearse now."

"You don't want me to give her a part, I hope?" the stage manager asked anxiously.

"Don't be an ass! She's never been on the stage before and I dare say she'll be a perfect stick. I just want you to be on the lookout and see that none of the fellows get fresh with her over there."

"That's all right, Duggie, old chap," the other promised, in a tone of relief. "Leave it to me. I'll look after her."

"And, say, don't bully her yourself, there's a good fellow. Remember that the great Sarah herself had to

have a first showing. And listen here, Sam. Tell her she's paid for rehearsals, and give her a fiver on Friday. I'll settle up with you."

"I'll attend to it. See you later."

Erwen returned to his seat and sipped his liqueur brandy. Having registered a solemn vow, in face of the whole company, that nothing should drag him to rehearsal again until the following week, he was wondering now what excuse he could make for breaking his word.

CHAPTER VIII

It was a day of wonderful happenings for Rosina. She reached home at about six o'clock to find a brief but excited note from Philip. The editor had materialised. He was a friendly person and was anxious to meet Rosina. They were to dine together that night at Romano's at a quarter to eight. Rosina must be there, without fail. There was a Treasury note enclosed in the letter, in case any of the small details of her toilette needed replenishing. The tears were in Rosina's eyes as she stuffed it into a corner of her purse, to be returned to Philip during the evening.

She spent the next hour making slight alterations to the one frock which represented her evening wardrobe. It was a task for which she had a peculiar aptitude, and even Philip looked at her with surprise as, a few minutes before the appointed time, she advanced towards them through the little throng waiting about in the vestibule of Romano's. The editor metaphorically rubbed his eyes. It was as though sunshine had been let into the rather gloomy place.

"Philip," she exclaimed, as she passed her arm through his, "I can't tell you how delighted I was to get your note! Here I am, you see, punctual and hungry. Is this Mr. Homan?"

"Mr. Mark Homan — Miss Vonet," Philip murmured. "Shall we go upstairs? We thought it would be quieter there."

They moved off towards the staircase. From a picturesque point of view, Mr. Homan was a disappoint-

ment. He was small, almost under-sized, his sandy hair was streaked with grey, his eyes were weak, his linen not altogether irreproachable, and his coat needed brushing. Rosina, however, took no heed of these things. He was the wonderful person who had bought two of Philip's stories and set him on the way to fortune. That was all that mattered.

"Philip tells me that you are starting a new magazine," she said, as they mounted the stairs together, "and that you have bought two of his stories. I can't tell you how glad I am. Of course, you'll think that I'm prejudiced, but they are good, aren't they?"

"Very fair stuff indeed," Mr. Homan assented. "He'll do all right if he doesn't try to fly before he can walk."

"You mean you think that he is a little too ambitious?"

They were ushered to their table. Mr. Homan, as giver of the feast, sat between the two young people.

"I mean," he explained to Rosina, "that it's no use writing what the class of people he writes for don't understand. He must choose his subjects according to popular demand, and then he'll get along all right. A good series of detective stories, now, is what every magazine in London is looking for."

"But I don't want to encourage Mr. Garth to write detective stories," Rosina observed, with a little grimace. "I don't like them."

"That is where you are unlike several millions of magazine readers," Mr. Homan rejoined drily. "One must study the larger public. A great deal of Mr. Garth's work is too fanciful for us."

"There is a market for it, though, isn't there?" Rosina asked timidly.

"There is," the editor admitted, "but, if you will for-

give my saying so, it is a market which brings him into competition with a great many writers of larger experience."

"I've decided to put my novel away for a time and try a detective story," Philip announced.

Rosina tried not to look disappointed.

"I love the novel," she said simply.

"I'll finish it some day," Philip promised, "but meantime one must live. Mr. Homan has paid me in advance for two stories, as you know, Rosina, and he has agreed to take a series of detective stories — six or even eight of them — if I can hit upon an original idea."

"It is very kind of Mr. Homan," Rosina declared gratefully. "I wish it were some other sort of work, but I am quite sure that you will be able to get an original idea, Philip, and, as Mr. Homan says, if the public wants detective stories, I suppose it must have them."

"There is a great deal of fiction about nowadays," Mr. Homan observed. "Tons of it in the post every day. I don't know when I shall have time to read the manuscripts I have waiting in my office now — some good, some bad, mostly indifferent."

"What are you going to call your new magazine, Mr. Homan?" Rosina enquired.

"'Homan's Monthly,'" the editor replied. "I didn't want to associate my own name with it particularly, but I couldn't think of anything else. We sha'n't cut much of a splash as regards paper and illustrations and that sort of thing. We've got to produce a medium-priced article in a medium-class way. It's an age of mediocre things, you know, Miss Vonet."

"Philip's work isn't mediocre, is it?" she asked, a little ruefully.

"I think I am justified in saying that it is slightly better than mediocre," Mr. Homan conceded. "To be

candid with you, the writing is very crude at times, and the proof reader may have to use his pencil here and there. But the stuff itself is all right. Do you follow any profession or are you in business, Miss Vonet?"

Rosina launched her thunderbolt.

"I am on the stage," she announced.

"On the stage?" Mr. Homan repeated, with some surprise.

"On the stage?" Philip gasped.

"Since this morning," she explained. "I am in the chorus of a new play to be produced at the Garrick, written by Mr. Douglas Erwen."

"What on earth are you talking about, Rosina?" Philip demanded.

She smiled radiantly across the table at him.

"It is quite true," she assured him. "My good fortune has followed very soon after yours. We need neither of us envy Matthew any more. I never thought that I could feel quite so happy."

She leaned back to listen to the music for a moment. Philip was suddenly conscious of the fact — which people at the adjoining tables had already realised — that, with this glow of happiness upon her face and shining out of her eyes, Rosina was adorably beautiful. A curious and indefinable wave of jealousy assailed him.

"Tell me exactly how you got them to try you at the Garrick?" he asked.

Rosina left off nodding her head to the music and leaned forward once more.

"I followed a little crowd into rehearsal at the theatre," she said. "It was all quite by chance, for I was on my way up the Charing Cross Road to try for an awful post at a fruiterer's shop. I got on to the back of the stage, somehow — all the girls have told me since that I was very lucky, as the doorkeeper would never have

let me pass if he had seen me — and I found myself standing next to a very nice-looking man who seemed as though he had something to do with the show, and I asked him if he thought I could get a place in the chorus. He looked at me as though I were mad, at first, and then, after we had talked for a few minutes, he sent for the stage manager and said that they were to try me. And that isn't all."

"Go on," Philip insisted.

"The nice man turned out to be Mr. Douglas Erwen, the author of the play," she concluded triumphantly, "and he took me to lunch in the grillroom at Ciro's."

Philip's face darkened.

"Took you to lunch?" he repeated. "You went with him — a stranger?"

Rosina laughed gaily. There was a flash of anxiety in her eyes, however, as she noticed the deepening frown on Philip's forehead.

"Don't be silly, dear," she begged. "Remember that, but for him, I should never have got a chance, and he was quite charming. There were all sorts of amusing people down in the grillroom. He introduced me to a fat young man who is a lord, and who is finding the money to produce the play, and, after I had left, he telephoned to the theatre to tell them to help me as much as possible. I am going to have five pounds a week, and what I have to do is quite simple and easy."

"An exceedingly fortunate start, I should say," Mr. Homan murmured sympathetically.

"Did you see anything more of Mr. Erwen afterwards?" Philip asked coldly.

"Of course not," Rosina replied. "They told me he wasn't expected to come to any more rehearsals until next week. I thought you'd be so glad," she added appealingly, looking across the table at Philip.

"You ought not to have lunched with the fellow," he declared, a little sullenly.

"But, my dear, why not?" Rosina protested. "It was all so natural, and, when he asked me, it never entered into my head to refuse. As a matter of fact, I was ridiculously hungry, and I had only fourpence in my purse — not that that mattered, of course — I could easily have borrowed some," she added quickly, noticing Philip's sensitive start. "Anyhow, I did lunch with him and I loved it, and he was delightful. Don't be cross, Philip, there's a dear."

"I am not in the least cross," Philip assured her stiffly.

"Very popular fellow, Douglas Erwen," Mr. Homan observed, with some idea of making a tactful interposition. "Must have made a lot of money with his plays, too, especially in the States. He is an American, you know."

"I hate Americans," Philip muttered.

"You wouldn't hate Mr. Erwen," Rosina said quietly, "because he is an exceedingly nice man."

The meal continued to its appointed end, but the glamour of it had gone. Rosina more than once asked herself if it were really true that this was, or should have been, the most wonderful evening of her life. Philip and she had passed at a single step from dire poverty to the land of promise. They were dining with an editor who had it in his power to make Philip famous, the orchestra was playing a beautiful selection from "Madame Butterfly", she herself had made a wonderful start in a new and most attractive profession. They should both have been riotously hilarious, instead of which her little efforts at rejoicing were counteracted by Philip's stolid silence. He mellowed a little with his last glass of wine, and she noticed with concern that he drank two liqueurs, one after

the other. Mr. Homan followed suit, only rather more quickly, and they sent for the bottle back again.

"Can I come back with you for a few minutes and tidy up your room?" she asked, looking across at Philip with a wonderful little smile upon her lips.

Philip hesitated and glanced across at their host.

"I'm afraid not to-night, Rosina," he replied. "Mr. Homan has promised to take me to a little club he belongs to."

"A club?" she murmured.

"The Junior Writers'," Mr. Homan intervened. "It's quite a decent little place, with a strong literary atmosphere. I thought it might be useful for Garth to join. I'm on the committee and I could get him in quickly."

"Why, of course," she assented. "I think it would be splendid. Only," she added, trying to choke something back in her throat, "I thought that just to-night, perhaps — but that's quite silly. Do take him to the club, Mr. Homan. I think it will be wonderful for Philip to meet some fellow authors and journalists."

"I can take you home first, if you like," Philip suggested, a little dubiously.

She shook her head.

"I shouldn't think of it," she insisted. "You go to the club with Mr. Homan now; then you won't have to stay too late. If you let me have your key, I'll go and tidy up for you and leave it under the mat."

Philip handed it across to her.

"Sure you don't mind?" he asked, a little shamefacedly.

"Not a bit. Perhaps — will you walk downstairs with me, dear?"

Mr. Homan was paying the bill, and Philip rose to his

feet at once and followed her. She thrust her arm through his directly they reached the stairs.

"Philip, dear," she said, "I am sorry if I did wrong in lunching with Mr. Erwen. You won't be cross with me any more, will you?"

"No," he promised magnanimously.

"And, dear," she went on, holding his arm tightly, "Mr. Homan's ever so nice, and I love him for buying your stories, but he does drink rather a great deal, doesn't he? You will be careful, please?"

"I can take care of myself, thanks," he answered. "Don't you worry about me, Rosina."

"Shall I see you to-morrow?" she asked wistfully. "I am rehearsing morning and afternoon, but I shall be free in the evening."

"I'll come round," he promised.

She made her adieux to Mr. Homan, who joined them at that moment, crossed the street not altogether happily, and made her way to the gloomy building at the top of which Philip's room was situated. She climbed the five flights of stone stairs, let herself in with a little sigh to his bare, untidy room, tucked up her skirt and set to work to clean it methodically. Then, by the light of the oil lamp, she went through his clothes, mended some socks, fastened some loose buttons on his shirts, filled the kettle and set it on the spirit stove for his breakfast in the morning, and finally wrote him a few hasty, affectionate lines, slipping the Treasury note which he had sent her into the envelope. Afterwards, she walked back to her own room, along the Embankment. Memories of their first day in London crowded inevitably into her mind. There was a touch of salt in the wind, blowing against the tide, a pleasant freshness in the air. Her spirits began to rise. After all, Philip's little fit of jealousy was such a trifling affair. And as for the rest, it was abso-

lutely necessary for his work that he should keep friends with Mr. Homan. The idea of a club, too, where he would meet other men who wrote, was wonderful. She decided that her disappointment was entirely selfish, and by the time she had reached her own little apartment, comfortless though it was, she had altogether regained her spirits. She undressed and went to bed happily enough, humming softly to herself fragments of the music which had drifted to her through the smoke-hung restaurant.

CHAPTER IX

It was, perhaps, the most complete surprise of his life when Benjamin Stone, arrived in London to interview a representative of the great firm who had been his largest customers for over twenty years, was ushered into one of the private offices to find Matthew seated in the chair of authority.

"Matthew!" he exclaimed. "Matthew Garner!"

Words refused to carry him any further. He stood grasping his hat in one hand and his umbrella in the other, gazing at this square-faced, self-assured young man who was leaning complacently back in his swivel chair.

"Yes, this is Matthew, all right," was the unhesitating reply. "Sit down, won't you? Bit of a shock seeing me here, I expect."

"A considerable shock," Benjamin Stone acknowledged, taking a chair and depositing his hat and umbrella upon the floor. "I did not even know that you were employed by this firm, much less that you were in a position to occupy a room in which I have generally been received by one of the senior partners."

"I offered these people my services a few days after I arrived in London," Matthew announced. "They took me on at three pounds ten a week. I have had three small rises since, and a large one recently. If I decide to stay, I shall be a partner in two years' time."

Benjamin eyed his connection impassively.

"I have no doubt that you are telling the truth," he said. "I never doubted your ability."

"Not even down at Norchester?"

"Not even at Norchester."

"Pity you didn't show a little more confidence in me, then," Matthew observed. "If you had adopted the suggestions I put forward eighteen months ago, the business of Benjamin Stone and Company would be in a sounder position than it is to-day."

"That is your opinion."

"It is my carefully considered opinion."

"And what reasons have you, may I ask," the older man continued, "for assuming that business is not so good with me as it was?"

"Oh, one hears things," Matthew replied, with a shrug of the shoulders. "I was down in Norchester a few weeks ago."

"Indeed?" was the cold rejoinder. "You did not honour me by a visit."

"Why should I? You have been my guardian, but I have little enough to thank you for. I earned all that you gave me in the factory, and a little more. I don't feel under any obligation to you, and when I think what a miserable time we all three had at Sion House, with your hard living, and prayers, and foolish strictness, I can't say that I feel any particular friendliness towards you."

Benjamin Stone looked steadily at his late ward from underneath his grey, bushy eyebrows for several moments without speaking. A very close observer might have fancied that his unmoved demeanour was not entirely natural — that he had, in effect, flinched a little at the cold callousness of the young man's words.

"My house," he said slowly, "was conducted in your time as it is now — on Christian principles and according to my lights. There was no self-indulgence, I admit. I held it my duty to see that there was no opportunity

for anything of the sort. I tried to bring you up as children of the Lord."

Matthew shrugged his shoulders.

"That sort of thing," he observed, "is a little out of date. However, I must not forget that you are here to-day to talk business."

"Surely not with you?" Benjamin Stone demanded.

"With me, if anybody," was the self-satisfied reply. "As a matter of fact, I am fully empowered to deal with you. Mr. Faringdon is hunting to-day, Mr. Nettleby is in the south of France, and the others here are only machines. Besides, the boot and shoe business is my department, and I know all about the Norchester trade."

"Supposing you let me hear what you have to say, then?" Benjamin Stone suggested.

The young man squared his shoulders and leaned over the table.

"Look here," he began, "I want you to get this into your head. You're a hard nut to crack, and you've kept your secret very well, but I didn't spend all those years in your factory for nothing. I could see how things were going, all the time. I understand your present position perfectly."

Benjamin Stone remained apparently unmoved. His bushy eyebrows, however, were drawn a little closer together.

"And what is your idea of my present position?" he enquired.

"Briefly, this," Matthew expounded. "I know that, so far from being the rich man people think, you are pretty well broke. I know that you've run that factory of yours on parsimonious lines to its last gasp. You've bought no new machinery for years. You've let every other factory in Norchester step ahead of you in plant

and every form of labour-saving device. You may be the nominal owner of a lot of land, but it's all mortgaged. There are a great many people in Norchester who look upon you as a millionaire. I wonder what your bank manager thinks about it."

The older man muttered something under his breath, which might have been a prayer or might have been some canonical form of imprecation, but of actual words none escaped him. He sat like a man stunned.

"You see now," Matthew went on, with a little note of triumph in his harsh tone, "it won't be any use trying to bluff me. We can do business if you want to, and we can do business for cash on the nail. I know that you need the cash, and you know that I know it."

"Tell me what your proposition is?" Benjamin Stone suggested, with something in his tone which might have been humility.

"We're overdone with capital here," Matthew explained. "We propose to use some of it in manufacturing the goods we've been buying from you. We'll buy you out, if you like, lock, stock and barrel — all your rotten old machinery, your worn-out belting, your wheezy old gas engine and your wretched fittings. We shall probably scrap the lot, but we'll buy you out for cash if you're a seller."

"At a valuation?" Benjamin Stone murmured.

"Not likely!" the younger man scoffed. "You keep your own book debts and your own liabilities. We'll give you twenty thousand pounds cash for your stock, plant, and freehold of the factory. You can have a cheque for five thousand on account, before you leave here, and the balance as soon as the lawyers can get the papers through."

"Twenty thousand pounds," Benjamin Stone repeated, in parrot-like fashion.

"It's our one figure, first and last," was the firm reply.

"I'm not attempting to bargain — at this moment, at any rate," Benjamin Stone declared, after a moment's reflection, "but will you explain to me how it is that you are in a position to make an offer of any definite sum without going through my stock or having my machinery valued?"

It was more than ever obvious that Matthew's eyes were a little narrow; also that they were set a little too closely together. The cold steadiness of his visitor's gaze utterly failed to disconcert him.

"I have been in your factory for seven years," he replied. "I know your machinery by heart. I know the average amount of stock you keep, and if it isn't in boots and shoes, it's in leather. Anyhow, that's our offer."

"I did my best," Benjamin Stone said gravely, "to bring you up honestly in the fear of the Lord and His Commandments. Yet you are lying to me now."

"Lying?" Matthew repeated indignantly.

"You were down in Norchester three weeks ago. You were there again three days ago. I saw my clerk, James Mulholland, leave the hotel where you were staying, and the figures from which you have made your offer were obtained from him."

Matthew shrugged his shoulders.

"You've tumbled to it, have you?" he remarked, without a shade of shamefacedness. "Well, it can't be helped. All's fair in a business deal, and Mulholland's figures were practically according to my own ideas. The stock was a few thousand pounds larger than I had imagined, I must confess, but that's neither here nor there."

"You bribed my clerk who has been with me for thirty years," Benjamin Stone said sternly.

"It was your own fault for not paying him better," Matthew rejoined. "You keep the poor devil with his nose to the grindstone all his life, and after thirty years' work you are still paying him four pounds a week. How the devil do you expect him to be honest? It isn't he who is to blame for trying to make an odd fifty pounds when the chance comes his way. You're the culprit for grinding him down, for keeping him a pauper. It's your sin, not his, if there is any."

Benjamin Stone showed no sign of anger. He seemed to be studying his late ward with a new interest.

"You've learnt to think for yourself since you left Norchester," he remarked.

"Oh, I thought a great deal when I was there," Matthew retorted, "but it didn't suit me to open my mouth then. I saw pretty well what your religion and your professed hatred of all forms of self-indulgence stood for. It was just grinding, narrow miserliness, a cloak for all sorts of meanness, an excuse for trying to hoard your money. You kept us without pocket money for fear we should spend it on 'sinful indulgence.' You underpaid the work you made us do, for the same reason. Well, you haven't done me any harm, except that you've set me against the inside of a church or a chapel for the rest of my days. But as for the other two — well, you'd better think about them the next time you pray for sinners, on a horsehair sofa!"

Benjamin Stone leaned forward. For the first time, the hard tranquillity of his face seemed disturbed.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"Nothing particular," Matthew replied, "except that I saw Philip drunk in the Strand last night. Lucky if he wasn't in the police court this morning."

"You didn't go to his assistance, then?"

Matthew laughed hardly.

"Not I! Why the devil should I? I couldn't afford to get mixed up in an affair like that."

"And Rosina?"

There was a very ugly look in Matthew's face.

"You are not much of a man of the world," he said, "but what did you suppose was likely to happen to Rosina — a pretty girl without a shilling to pay for her lodgings, and no one but a drunken boy to look after her? I saw her with a lot of chorus girls, coming out of the stage door of the Garrick Theatre, a few evenings ago. You can judge for yourself how much good your three-quarters of an hour prayers every day of our lives for all those years have done her!"

The mask, if it were a mask, had fallen again. Benjamin Stone did not flinch. There was even a certain dignity in his speech.

"I have done my best, according to my lights," he pronounced. "The life which I preached to you three who were committed to my charge is the life I have lived myself. I might, perhaps," he went on, after a moment's thoughtful hesitation, "have endeavoured to extend some further help to Philip, the weakest of you. I might have done this but for one thing."

"And that?" Matthew asked curiously.

"Philip robbed me on the night before his departure," Benjamin Stone said sadly. "He went to the factory, on some excuse or other, and he robbed me of fifty pounds."

There was a brief silence. Matthew was holding the sides of the desk at which he sat.

"How do you know that?" he demanded.

"I was in the factory myself," was the sorrowful reply. "I saw him there, saw him in the office."

"Robbed you of fifty pounds," Matthew repeated. "I wonder you let him get away with it."

"I was wrong," the other admitted. "That matter, however, does not lie between you and me. Our interview was to be a business one."

"Twenty thousand pounds is our offer," Matthew pointed out.

"I accept."

Matthew was startled into some show of surprise.

"You are willing to sell out, then?" he exclaimed.

"I am. Draft me a rough agreement, and let me have an open cheque for that five thousand pounds."

Matthew summoned the cashier, and the affair was brought to its natural conclusion. Benjamin Stone placed the cheque carefully in his pocketbook, rose to his feet and took up his hat and umbrella. The cashier had already left the room.

"As a matter of curiosity," Matthew enquired, leaning back in his chair, "will that twenty thousand pounds, and your book debts, be sufficient to discharge your liabilities? It was the one point on which I found old Mulholland a little reticent."

Benjamin Stone smiled a very thin smile.

"With the help of the balances from my mortgaged property," he said, "I am hoping that it may be sufficient to spare you the disgrace of seeing a relative in the Bankruptcy Court. I shall remain at Smith's Temperance Hotel in Russell Square until the final papers are ready for my signature."

"So as to get the other fifteen thousand pounds before you return to Norchester?"

"Precisely!"

"The matter shall be hurried through as quickly as possible," Matthew promised.

There was no further speech, no attempt at any interchange of the most formal courtesies. Benjamin Stone simply left the room, closing the door behind him. He

walked through the familiar offices and out into the street. He had the air of a man alone with his thoughts. Behind, Matthew sat reading the draft agreement, drinking in every word of it, a slow, cruel smile upon his lips. It was the first tangible triumph of his life.

CHAPTER X

Male callers at the girls' hostel where Rosina had taken up her temporary abode were few and far between, and arrangements for their reception somewhat chilly. Rosina was called from her room about seven o'clock on the evening of Benjamin Stone's visit to the city, to be curtly informed by a severe housekeeper, who heartily disapproved of her new charge, that a gentleman was waiting to see her in the parlour. Rosina, who had paid two fruitless visits to Philip's rooms within the last twenty-four hours, did not trouble to enquire, even, as to whom the caller might be. She laughed happily, put on her discarded hat, forgot that she was tired after three hours' rehearsal — mostly, so far as she was concerned, standing about — and hurried downstairs into the stuffy little reception room to find Matthew, with his hands behind him, looking out of the window.

"Matthew!" she exclaimed, genuinely surprised. "I never dreamed that it was you!"

"I offered my name, but the housekeeper didn't seem to want to hear it," he replied. "I don't like this room, Rosina, and I should like to talk to you. Will you come out and have dinner with me somewhere?"

She looked at him wonderingly. He was quietly but well dressed after the fashion of the class to whose ranks he was climbing. His dinner coat and black tie were irreproachable, his linen correct, his plain gold studs unobtrusive. His air of complete self-possession moved her to a half-unwilling admiration.

"But, Matthew," she protested, "what would Philip say?"

"Philip is an ass," was the somewhat impatient rejoinder. "He proved it, the night we all parted."

"You didn't mean — what he thought you meant?" she asked eagerly.

"I meant nothing at all," he assured her, "just as, at the present moment, I mean nothing except that I want to take you out to dinner."

"It would be rather nice," she confessed, "especially as I can't find Philip, and a solitary sixpence is all I possess until — listen well, Matthew — until treasury day to-morrow."

"Treasury day?" he repeated.

"I'll tell you all about it as we go along," she promised. "Can we go somewhere where they wear old clothes and I sha'n't disgrace you?"

"Of course we can; clothes aren't anything," he answered sententiously.

"They're going to form a good part of my life for the next few days," she declared. "I've paid all my debts, Matthew, I draw five pounds to-morrow, and I'm going to spend the greater part of it in clothes. Come along, then, if you're really going to take me to dine. I am so nearly starving that I was going to ask them if they would trust me for the house dinner here."

Matthew called a taxi, notwithstanding his companion's protests, and they drove to a small but intimate restaurant in Soho, a restaurant where the tables were a long way apart and the sole illumination was provided by rose-shaded lamps. Matthew, who had only heard of the place, entered with the air of an habitué, handed his coat and hat to a bowing *vestiaire*, and at once commandeered the best table. Rosina leaned back in her corner and looked around her with delight.

"I don't care a bit about my clothes here, Matthew," she declared. "It looks delightfully romantic but horribly expensive."

"The time will soon arrive, Rosina, where expense will be of no consequence in the world to me," was the confident reply.

"How ever do you manage to make such rapid progress?" she asked wonderingly.

He smiled.

"Some people find it just as easy to travel the other way," he said. "Do you know whom I had to see me in the city this morning, Rosina?"

"I can't imagine," she acknowledged.

"Mr. Benjamin Stone."

"Uncle Benjamin? Do you mean that he really has taken the trouble to see what has become of us?"

"I'm afraid that I can't do him that credit," Matthew answered. "Even our meeting was entirely accidental. He came to see the firm with whom I am in business."

"What a joke!" Rosina laughed. "Was he surprised to see you?"

"He was surprised when he found that it was I with whom he had to deal," Matthew replied, with a slightly self-conscious smile. "My firm have been his largest customers for years."

"Did he help you to get your place with them?" Rosina asked.

"Help me? Not he!" Matthew scoffed. "Can you see Uncle Benjamin helping one of us! Never mind, I turned the tables on him this morning. Do you know what I did, Rosina?"

"Of course I don't. Tell me, please?" she begged.

"I bought him out — bought his factory at Norchester, bought his plant, stock, good will, name, and all the lot of it."

"Goodness gracious!" she gasped.

"Can you guess why he had to sell?" Matthew went on.

"How could I?"

"To pay his creditors," he declared triumphantly.

Rosina was bewildered.

"I don't understand that at all," she confessed. "Uncle Benjamin is a very rich man, isn't he?"

"I very much doubt whether he's worth a shilling," Matthew announced, with zest. "I have suspected it for a long while. All the time I was in the factory, I kept on pointing out to him how behindhand the firm was, how money could be made instead of lost, how, by a little enterprise and by spending a little, we could have saved thousands. Not a bit of use. He preferred praying for prosperity to working for it. He wouldn't listen to me, and this is the end of it."

"Poor Uncle Benjamin!" Rosina murmured.

"We shall remodel the factory and make a lot of money out of it," Matthew proceeded. "Rosina, taste your champagne. It is one of the best brands. We will drink to my partnership with the firm of Faringdon, Nettleby, Ford and Company. It will come very soon, Rosina. I am going to be a very rich man."

She tasted the wine and laughed across at him as she drank his toast. In her cheap clothes, underneath the hat which her own fingers had fashioned and trimmed, she was still radiantly beautiful. She brought with her into the restaurant, redolent of a thousand sordid flirtations, an atmosphere of delicate freshness, of virginal passion for life and its joys, which gave her an unanalysable and indefinable charm. Even Matthew's turgid blood crept through his veins a little more warmly for the sight of her.

"You really are very clever, Matthew," she declared.

"I am clever in one way, just as Philip may be clever in another," he answered. "I wish I could make you realise, Rosina, that, so long as this is the world in which we have got to live, mine is the way that will count. The man with the type of brains that makes money and brings power is the man who climbs here. Philip likes to dream and moon about, and because he can put a few pleasant-sounding words together about things that never have and never could have happened, he thinks himself superior to every one else, and you humour him and pretend to believe the same thing. What's he going to get out of his story-writing, if he's successful? A ten-roomed house in the suburbs when he's middle-aged, and the joy of his work cramped every day by having to write things to pay the bills! I have thought this all out, Rosina. The poor man has got to live in a small world, and the smaller the world, the narrower he becomes, and the more completely any gifts he may possess shrink away and lessen. Mind you, this is if he is moderately successful. If he fails, it just means drink and shabbiness and misery."

The light had passed for a time out of Rosina's face. She was conscious of a chill disquietude. All her first joy in the warmth and the pleasant food and the glow of the wine had momentarily passed. She felt the depressing influence of Matthew's words, the nearness of ugly and unfamiliar things.

"When have you thought this all out so carefully, Matthew?" she asked.

"We all have our own idea of recreation," he replied. "When I'm not at my work, and I've nothing particular to think about in connection with it, I just try to get the things of the world, with which I am not in actual touch, into their proper focus. If there is anything I want to bring into my life, I just plan how to get it there."

"You talk like a spider sitting in the middle of his web," she protested, half mirthfully, half uneasily.

He smiled complacently.

"The simile is a bad one," he said. "I do not need to destroy. I am content to brush to one side anything that stands in my way. As an example of what I mean, I will take your own outlook. You saw life truthfully enough when we three came up to London. You knew what you wanted, just as I did. That was so much to the good. You wanted soft silks to wear next your body, you wanted gowns fashioned by an artist to float around you, hats fashioned by fingers that understood, the right sort of jewellery, flowers, music — in short, all the graces of life. On the whole, I approve. These are the things to which a beautiful woman has some claim. Unless she has a talent, and can use it, there is little more which she can ask of life."

He paused and looked across at her earnestly.

"Well?" she asked.

"Philip will never be able to give you those things; I shall."

Rosina did not flinch. She studied her companion gravely, yet not without a certain almost childish curiosity, an ingenuous desire to obtain the truth, even at the risk of pain.

"But you do not wish to marry me, as Philip does?"

If Matthew had ever run any risk of departing from his established principles in life, that might have been the moment, for there was a thrill in the very naïveté of the question. He hesitated, and the world seemed upside down, roaring strange music in his ears. Then he was himself again.

"No," he admitted, "I do not wish to marry you."

She faced the situation bravely, determined to make no back-door retreat.

"Then why tantalise me?" she asked. "I quite agree with you, up to a certain point. Philip's talents may never bring material prosperity. I may have to do without the things which I should love to have. On the other hand, we may find a different sort of happiness."

The tenseness of the moment had passed. Matthew, like many a greater general before him, had withdrawn his forces to avoid disaster. He called for coffee and liqueurs, lit a cigarette, and assumed the good-natured air of a man who yields a point out of courtesy.

"I shall be ready to resume the conversation," he said, "whenever it pleases you — or rather, whenever a certain time arrives."

"What time?"

"When you are ready to speak of and for yourself; when you do not commence by saying 'Philip and I.'"

"That will be never," she declared, a little defiantly.

"I am inclined to doubt it," was the deliberate rejoinder.

A sort of terror of life and all that it might mean seized her as she sat there. Matthew seemed so sure of himself and his outlook. What if he should be right, after all — if life should develop into a sort of Juggernaut of materialism, beneath the hideous weight of which, dreams and aspirations, everything that came from the soul, were crushed to death by the sheer brute force of necessity! She thought of Philip's struggle, a poor affair at present. She remembered herself, saved practically from starvation by a lucky chance. She remembered the sordid details of their poverty, and for a moment her faith flickered, the pain of it tore at her heartstrings.

"I want to go," she said. "You're depressing me, Matthew."

He laughed and looked at his watch.

"I haven't done with you yet," he told her. "Wouldn't you like to go to a music hall?"

"Of course I should," she agreed. "What a dear you are to think of it! Let's go at once — this very moment. This place seems filled with grinning fancies. I've enjoyed my dinner so much, Matthew, but I'm dying to get away."

He paid the bill, and they found two vacant stalls at one of the big Variety houses. The show was ordinary enough, but Rosina passed back at once into her normal self. With hundreds of cheerful people around her, life itself seemed to beat to a different tune, even though the people were strangers, and the pianist who was occupying the stage was evidently suffering from the desire to render popular music. She suffered no relapse in spirits for the rest of the evening. When the performance was over, she firmly resisted Matthew's desire to take a taxi and made him walk home with her. She even took his arm in the old, friendly fashion.

"You haven't told me about this last venture of yours, Rosina," he reminded her. "I think I have some idea as to what it is. I saw you coming out of the stage door of the Garrick, the other evening."

She told him about her adventure, and he expressed his approval.

"I think that you are very lucky," he declared. "Any play by Douglas Erwen is certain to run for some time. When is the first night?"

"On Monday," she replied, with a little grimace. "I am shivering already."

"Anyhow," he observed, "whether the show is a success or not, the experience will be good for you."

"What do you mean by that?" she asked.

"I mean that a little more insight into real life won't do you any harm."

"I sha'n't find out anything about real life in the chorus at the Garrick," she objected.

"You are a little young yet," he said indulgently, "to know what real life consists of. Your brain is still filled with fancies. There was just one chapter of the Bible which Uncle Benjamin used to shove down our throats, which seemed to me to have some common sense in it. 'Render unto Cæsar the things which are Cæsar's,' came in it. I call that sound philosophy. Sooner or later you'll find out that, so long as you are of this world, you must live as though you are — until you get to the next. Will you come and dine with me again soon, Rosina?"

She answered him quite frankly.

"Matthew, I really don't know."

"Why not? I've tried to give you a pleasant evening."

"And, believe me, I'm very grateful," she assured him. "But as to coming again — well, for one thing I don't think Philip would like it, and for another — "

"Well, for another?" he insisted, after a somewhat prolonged pause.

They were standing on the pavement outside the door of her hostel. Suddenly she leaned over and gave him the little kiss on the cheek which had been their nightly salute at Norchester.

"Oh, I don't know," she laughed. "I expect I'm a most tremendous idiot, and fancy some things and don't understand others. We'll see. Good night, Matthew!"

Matthew, on his homeward walk, amused himself by taking stock of his progress with Rosina. There was a debit and a credit side to this, as there was to all his few pleasures. Apart from the financial side of the question — with all his seeming carelessness, he knew to a penny what his evening's entertainment had cost him — there was the fact that he might have attended an evening

party at the house of a lady in whom he was far more seriously interested than in Rosina. Yet there remained always to confuse him that unanalysable factor — human preference — a factor which he found, to his dismay, was stealthily assuming unjustifiable proportions. When he had reached his rooms, he had almost arrived at the same decision as Rosina, who was just then creeping stealthily into her cubicle.

"I do not think," she sighed, as she turned out her light, "that I must go out again with Matthew."

CHAPTER XI

Rosina came down the paved way which led from the stage door of the Garrick Theatre into Charing Cross Road, with flying footsteps. Philip, a little weary with his half-hour's wait in the windy street, welcomed her with joy.

"At last, dear!" she exclaimed. "I've been trying so hard to get away, but the dressing rooms were all crowded and it seemed impossible to move. Mr. Erwen has gone on to the Savoy, and he left a special message to say how glad he should be to see you. I'm afraid we'll have to have a cab. I've spent all my money on this frock, and couldn't afford anything that even looked like a cloak."

"We'll have a cab, of course," Philip replied, hailing one from the other side of the street. "I should have had one waiting, but I couldn't tell exactly what time you'd be out."

They took their places inside and directed the man to drive to the Savoy.

"Kiss me at once, please, Philip," Rosina begged, "but don't disarrange my hair. I am really too excited to breathe. Tell me what you thought of it all?"

Philip held her for a moment in his arms. She closed her eyes with the delight of his embrace.

"I saw you, dear, quite well," he said, as they settled down. "I was in the third row of the pit, and you looked sweet."

Rosina smiled contentedly.

"I felt so stiff and awkward," she confided, "and I'm

terrified for my five pounds a week. I heard some one tell Mr. Erwen that we were really only in the way — didn't help the play at all — and I'm afraid that he was right. One of the other girls told me that, if Mr. Erwen hadn't insisted, we should all of us have been sent away at the last rehearsal."

Philip frowned slightly.

"Have you been seeing much of this fellow Erwen lately?" he demanded.

Rosina looked straight ahead of her.

"Very little," she replied. "He asked me to go out to lunch with him the other day, but I got him to take some of the other girls, too. Last night he invited me to dine, but I remembered what you asked me, Philip — I didn't go."

"Did you mind not going?" he demanded jealously.

"Just a little, I did," Rosina admitted. "You see, he is really very nice, Philip, and you were engaged with Mr. Homan, and dinner at the hostel is simply awful."

Philip was momentarily gloomy.

"I had to go with Homan," he said. "He wanted to introduce me to the man who has been illustrating my stories."

"Of course! I understood that, dear," Rosina replied. "I didn't really mind a bit. Tell me what you thought about the illustrator, and how is Mr. Homan?"

"Homan's all right," Philip answered, "but I didn't think much of the illustrator. The fact of it is, Rosina, I'm afraid that the magazine is going to be a pretty cheap sort of affair."

Rosina nodded sympathetically.

"Of course it will be, dear," she agreed, "but then, after all, you must make a start. I don't fancy myself grinning for five pounds a week from the back of the stage at the Garrick, but we've got to live, haven't we,

until our time comes? Meanwhile, let's make up our minds to thoroughly enjoy ourselves. We're going to a real first-night supper party at the Savoy, you're wearing your first dress suit and I have a new frock."

"Dress suit from a second-hand place, price two pounds ten," Philip observed, looking down. "I kept my overcoat on in the pit, so that it shouldn't get dusty. The trousers are a little short, but the coat isn't bad."

"It's a beautiful fit," Rosina insisted, "and as for the price, my gown only cost three pounds."

"You made most of it yourself," Philip reminded her, "and you couldn't have looked nicer if it had cost thirty."

"So long as we are satisfied with one another, nothing matters, does it?" Rosina declared, holding his arm a little more tightly. "Do you see where we are? Do you realise, Philip, that we are actually in the courtyard of the Savoy? There's where we stood with our backs to the wall and looked in through the great windows, that first night in London. We didn't think we should be here together so soon, did we?"

Philip made a little grimace.

"It isn't quite the same thing, coming like this," he reminded her. "I'd rather we were having supper alone together out of my first publisher's cheque, than that I was coming here as the guest of your friend."

"We can't have everything," Rosina observed cheerfully. "It's quite wonderful enough, as it is. There's Mr. Erwen standing just inside, by the door. Pay the man quickly and come along, Philip."

Erwen welcomed Philip with some curiosity, introduced the two to some other guests, and led them all presently to the great table in the middle of the restaurant, where supper had been prepared. With the exception of Rosina, only the principals in the play were present, but there was at least a score of other guests, most of them

people who were interested in the theatre, and a few already known to Rosina. Reggie Towers greeted her across the table, and seemed a little surprised at the presence of her companion.

"You seem to know quite a great many people," Philip remarked.

"They drop into the theatre at rehearsal time," she explained, "and Mr. Erwen is like all Americans — he introduces everybody to every one. It's a friendly sort of place, Philip, as you'll find out when your play is produced," she added softly.

She suddenly discovered that she knew the girl next to her companion, and introduced him. Philip, however, was not inclined to be sociable. He was watching his host, who leaned across continually to talk to Rosina. Erwen appeared to find the latter's conversation so engrossing, in fact, that Elinor Hardman, the leading lady, who was seated on his right, began to fancy herself neglected.

"Who is the ingénue, Douglas?" she whispered.

"Well, you ought to recognise her," he answered. "She's in the show."

"Really?" was the somewhat languid reply. "I hadn't noticed her. And the truculent-looking person by her side?"

"A young man from her part of the country," Erwen explained. "They're rather by way of being a couple of babes in the wood, come from the back of nowhere to make their fortunes in the city."

"The young man will be very good-looking some day," Miss Hardman declared, "if he gets over his sulkiness and doesn't drink too much champagne. Shall I take him in hand?"

"I wish you would," was the tactless reply.

"So that you could flirt with his companion," Miss Hardman observed coldly.

Erwen frowned.

"One doesn't flirt with a child like that," he said under his breath. "To tell you the truth, Elinor, I'm rather sorry I ever gave her a job at the theatre."

The young lady smiled, not altogether pleasantly.

"Why did you do it, then?"

"There you get me," he admitted. "Kind of fancy, I suppose. She wandered into the place quite by accident, in the most ingenuous sort of way, and, before I realised what I was doing, I made Sam take her on. She's so wonderfully young, so keen to enjoy and so ridiculously ignorant. The stage is the wrong sort of forcing house for her, and she is there before her time. If she is really fond of the boy, that may help her."

Miss Elinor Hardman was frankly bored. She turned a very bare and very white shoulder upon her host and proceeded to talk with animation to Reggie Towers. Presently, the little company moved downstairs, in twos and threes, to dance. Erwen himself showed Rosina and Philip the way to the ballroom.

"Miss Vonet tells me that you are a writer," he remarked pleasantly to the latter.

"I hope to be some day," Philip replied. "I haven't had much luck yet."

"Mr. Garth has two stories coming out in a new magazine almost at once," Rosina announced.

"Capital! I suppose you'll try your hand at a play, some day or other?" his host went on.

"I have one under way," Philip admitted.

Erwen laughed good-humouredly.

"Why, you're beginning even earlier than I did!" he exclaimed. "If you want any hints at any time, come and look me up. I live in the hotel here when I'm over on this side. Here we are," he added, as they entered the ballroom. "Do you mind if I dance with Miss Vonet?

That's our table over there. You'll find some champagne going, and these girls are all crazy on dancing, if you care about it."

"I'm afraid I'm terribly stupid," Rosina confessed, smiling up at her host.

"I guess I sha'n't discover that," he answered. "Any way, we'll try."

Philip went over to the table and at first made some efforts to be agreeable. The young women of the party, however, were speedily claimed by older friends, and there was nothing for him to do but to sit down and watch. Rosina, to whom dancing was a new joy, was perhaps a little led away by the intense pleasure of it all, the subtle flattery of her host's point-blank refusal to let her go. Philip sat and drank champagne, and the more he drank, the grimmer his face became, the whiter his cheeks, the more brilliant the one little spot of colour. Rosina, floating by in a dream of delight, a dream in which her partner played a very inconsiderable share, was suddenly reminded of him. She stopped short.

"Do forgive me, Mr. Erwen," she begged. "I forgot all about Philip. I must not leave him alone any longer."

"He can find some one to talk to, if he wants to," her partner objected. "Let's finish this dance, anyway."

But Rosina had already left him. She crossed the floor to where Philip was seated. He made no effort to rise — he did not even smile. He had the appearance of a sulky boy.

"Philip, dear, I'm so sorry I've left you alone all this time!" she exclaimed, a little frightened. "The dancing has been so wonderful. Do come and try. I'm perfectly certain you can manage all right, if you just listen to the music."

Philip rose a little unsteadily to his feet.

"I'm going home," he announced.

Rosina turned and held out her hand to her host, who was hovering in the background.

"It has been a wonderful party, Mr. Erwen," she declared. "Thank you so much for asking us."

"But you mustn't go yet," he protested. "There are half a dozen men here, besides myself, who want to dance with you."

"You promised me, Miss Vonet," Reggie Towers, who had just hurried up, declared.

There were other protests. Rosina shook her head to them all.

"Don't hurry Miss Vonet off," Erwen begged, turning to Philip. "The night's young yet."

"Miss Vonet can do as she likes," Philip rejoined, gripping the back of a chair. "I have some work to do — some proofs."

"Perhaps, under those circumstances, you will accept my escort home, Miss Vonet?" Erwen begged, turning to Rosina.

She shook her head, laughing, and passed her arm firmly through Philip's.

"I am tired, too," she said. "Come along, Philip."

They made their adieux and departed. In the lounge, whilst Rosina waited for Philip to fetch his coat and hat, a breathless page boy slipped a card into her hand. She glanced at the few pencilled words quickly:

> Please come back when you have taken him home. I must have one more dance.
>
> D. E.

She tore the card quickly across.

"There is no answer," she told the boy, turning away.

It seemed to Rosina that the whole glamour of the evening faded as soon as she was alone with Philip in the taxi. He sat stretched out in an ungraceful attitude,

with his hands in his coat pockets, his face still set and grim. There was no consciousness of her near presence, beautiful and pulsating with life though she was. He seemed to be nursing some sombre grievance.

"Well," he said, "I hope you've enjoyed yourself."

The sweetness of her began to shrivel up at the first sound of his voice. She was suddenly conscious that he had had a great deal too much to drink, that his hair was ruffled, his tie ill-arranged, his shirt front creased, his voice thick.

"I have enjoyed myself very much indeed, up to now," she rejoined.

"I don't know what I came to the d—d party for," he muttered.

"Neither do I," she remarked amiably.

"If those are your friends," he went on, "if those are the people you are going to spend all your time with, why bother about me? I don't know any of them, and I don't want to. I don't dance, I don't want to drink their wine or eat their suppers. And as for your show, I hate it."

"Aren't you a little difficult to-night, or is it my fancy?" she asked, with fine satire.

"Your fancy entirely," he assured her. "I've been having a delightful evening and I'm in the wildest possible spirits."

The taxicab came to an unexpected standstill. She looked out of the window in surprise.

"Why, Philip, this is Adam Street!" she exclaimed. "Aren't you going to see me home?"

"No!" he answered. "You'd better go back and dance for another hour or so with Mr. Douglas Erwen. Here's the money for the cab."

She pushed it away and drew a sharp little breath which sounded almost like a sob. His hand was already upon the door.

"Philip," she protested, "you're not in earnest. You won't leave me like this?"

"I think you'll find that I shall," he answered, stepping out of the cab without even touching her fingers.

She leaned out of the window.

"Philip," she pleaded, "don't be so brutal. If you haven't had a pleasant evening, it isn't my fault. I did all that I could, but you have been a little difficult, haven't you? Come and drive me home, dear. You haven't kissed me once. You haven't even said good night."

He turned for a moment and faced her, holding on to his latchkey with his right hand. There was nothing to tell her that, in his way, he was decidedly and distinctly drunk.

"Good night!" he said, and passed inside the building, slamming the door behind him.

"Where to, miss?" the taxicab driver enquired.

Rosina sat with her hands clasped tightly in each other. All the joy of the evening seemed spent. There remained only an aftermath of utter and complete misery. Then a sudden anger blazed up in her. It was his own suggestion, his own fault.

"Back to the Savoy," she told the man.

CHAPTER XII

Douglas Erwen's party showed no signs of flagging. Only the host himself seemed unaccountably to have lost his interest in the proceedings. Elinor Hardman frankly challenged him with his lack of spirits, and, receiving no satisfactory reply, deserted him for more appreciative partners. Erwen sought out his friend, Reggie Towers, and sat down with him to watch the dancing. The latter, though not a person of remarkable discrimination, echoed Miss Hardman's observation.

"Seem a bit hipped to-night, Duggie, what?" he ventured. "The show went all right, didn't it? I'm not afraid for my money. Good for five hundred nights, I should think."

"Oh, curse the show!" Erwen answered irritably. "It isn't that at all. It's just the little things that seem to have got me on the raw."

Lord Reginald nodded in sympathetic silence, and made mystic signs to one of the waiters relative to the opening of a gold-foiled bottle.

"First of all," Erwen enlarged, dropping his voice a little, "these girls get on my nerves. Elinor's a good sort in her way, but she's trying — she harps on the same thing too long. Then I ought to go back to New York, but I don't like leaving the show just yet. And finally, everybody — Elinor, Sam, the producer, and every member of the company — insists upon having the chorus cleared out. I suppose they ought to go, but — "

"But you hate sending your little ingénue away?" Reggie Towers ventured. "Can't you put a line or two

in for her somewhere? She's pretty enough to be worth keeping in the show."

"Say, don't you think I'd just love to!" Erwen replied forcibly. "But how can I? She's no more idea of acting than the biggest gawk who was ever booed off the stage. She's just as sweet and self-conscious as she can be, from the moment when she makes her most unstage-like entrance, to the moment she gets off — heaven knows how! And she's never earned five pounds a week before, and she thinks it's going on for ever."

"No way you can make it up to her, I suppose?" Lord Reginald remarked guardedly.

"What the devil way is there?" Erwen rejoined, with some irritation. "I could no more offer her money than I could offer it to one of your princesses. She's over-sensitive now, and I had the hardest work to arrange that matter about payment for rehearsals. Some ass told her that it wasn't usual, and she came to me in a great state. She hasn't a dollar to her name — no more has that other country cousin she brought with her to-night."

"Sulky, Byronic youth," Reggie Towers reflected. "I didn't like him."

"Young cub," Erwen agreed warmly. "Sulked because I danced with the child a few times. Her first party, too! And then took her off home just as she was beginning to enjoy herself."

"She may come back again," Reggie suggested hopefully. "Didn't you say that you had sent her a message?"

"I sent her a message, all right," was the dejected reply, "but she won't come. As a matter of fact, I am afraid she was angry at my proposing it. The page boy says that she tore up the card."

Lord Reginald sipped his wine thoughtfully, tapped a cigarette upon the table and leaned back in his chair.

"That might have been so that the young cub with her shouldn't see it," he observed.

"I'll bet you a fiver she doesn't come," Erwen offered gloomily.

"It would be easy money," the other replied, "but unfair — for behold!"

Erwen followed the direction of his friend's gesture and sprang to his feet with a little exclamation. Rosina was standing upon the threshold of the room, looking about her. She saw Erwen's wave of the hand and advanced to meet him at once. Glad though he was, the sight of her gave him almost a shock. It seemed as though she had grown from a child to a woman since they had parted, a quarter of an hour ago.

"You see, I have done as you suggested," she said. "Philip is tired and I have taken him home. I have come back for some more dances."

"I am a great deal more glad than I know how to tell you just at the moment," Erwen declared, as they moved off together. "Somehow, I haven't fancied dancing since you left," he added, under his breath. "There's no one else steps so lightly as you do."

There was dancing and more dancing, supper and more champagne, of which Rosina partook, although sparingly enough. There were plenty of other men anxious to dance with her, and Rosina kept the promise she had made to herself when she had driven away from Philip's rooms. The little sob in her heart was forgotten. Every one — at least, so it seemed to her — was friendly and delightful. The music and dancing by themselves were a joy. She let herself go with all the pent-up longing of her heart. This was the sort of innocent pleasure and companionship for which she had longed. She had a smile for every one. Her eyes were aglow and her feet seemed to move upon the air. Several times, Erwen almost lost

his head, but the faintly troubled look in her eyes when he showed signs of offending, seemed to check the simplest words of love-making upon his lips. Once, when Rosina was dancing with Reggie Towers, and Erwen, instead of doing his duty elsewhere, was impatiently awaiting her return, Elinor Hardman crossed the room and stood for a moment by his side.

"Your little ingénue is coming on, Douglas," she observed, directing his attention to the dancers.

He affected not to notice the malice beneath her words.

"It is her first party," he said. "I want her to enjoy it."

"You seem to be succeeding," was the somewhat caustic reply, — "a little at the expense of some of your other guests, perhaps."

She left him as Rosina returned, followed by her protesting partner. Erwen danced with her again and again. The night wore on. Rosina suddenly realised that the rooms were nearly empty. She gave a little start.

"I am behaving shockingly," she declared. "Nearly every one has gone, and I ought to have been one of the first. Can you show me where to get a taxi, please?"

Erwen laughed.

"Don't be a silly child," he said. "I shall see you home, of course. They won't miss me for a few minutes. This way."

He paused in the vestibule.

"Aren't you going to fetch your cloak?" he asked.

"I haven't a cloak," she confided. "Fancy coming to one's first party without a cloak and without a chaperon! But I shall never forget it. Every one has been sweet — especially you, dear host."

She gave his arm a little friendly squeeze as she spoke. He handed her into the taxicab. His voice, when he spoke, sounded a little unnatural.

"This isn't the sort of life for you, anyway," he declared. "How did you stumble into it? Haven't you really a relative in the world to look after you?"

She leaned back in the corner of the cab and closed her eyes. She was suddenly tired.

"No one except Uncle Benjamin," she murmured, "and we all three ran away from him."

"Haven't you an older woman friend in London — any one at all to take care of you?" he persisted, almost roughly.

She opened her eyes and looked at him.

"I don't need one," she assured him. "Of course, I should like a woman friend very much, and some day I dare say I shall have one. Meanwhile, I can take care of myself."

"Take care of yourself! Poor child!" he groaned.

She sat up in her place.

"You seem very strange, all of a sudden," she complained. "Is anything the matter? I haven't displeased you, have I?"

"Displeased me? You poor little baby, no!" he replied. "Only I wish you'd tell me the name of this uncle of yours from whom you ran away."

"His name is Benjamin Stone and he lives at Norchester. Why do you want to know?"

"Some day," Erwen muttered, "I may tell him just what I think of him. Meanwhile, this, I suppose, is your abode. Looks pretty gloomy, doesn't it?"

"They're all in bed, I expect," Rosina remarked. "Tell me, what time is it?"

"Ten minutes past four."

She was suddenly aghast.

"And every one is supposed to be in by half-past eleven," she murmured. "I forgot even to let them know that I should be late."

"You have a key?"

"Yes, thank goodness! I shall crawl in. Good night, Mr. Erwen. I can't thank you enough for your party."

"You don't need to thank me any," he assured her. "You've been the party. Hurry in now. I'll wait and see that you're all right."

Rosina stepped lightly across the pavement, glittering from the effects of a recent shower, thrust the key into the lock and turned it. The lock yielded easily enough but the door remained immovable. Her heart sank as she realised that it was bolted inside. She rang the bell — once — twice — without result. Then a window on the first floor opened. Rosina looked up.

"Please, Miss Dean, can you send some one to let me in?" she begged. "I've been to a party, and the door is bolted."

The woman leaned a little farther out of the window. What she said was conveyed in one or two sentences which Erwen could not hear, and which Rosina never at any time repeated. Erwen, however, was just in time to catch the girl upon the pavement. Rosina, as pale as death, had very nearly collapsed. She clung to him for a moment hysterically. They heard the closing of the window above.

"They won't let me in — she won't take me back," Rosina faltered. "Tell me that you didn't hear what she said?" she added, almost fiercely.

"I didn't hear a word," he assured her. "Look here, you'd better let me go and see what I can do."

"Don't go near her!" Rosina implored passionately. "Let me get away somewhere. I can go to Philip. He will help me find a room."

"Tell me the address?" he enquired.

She gave it to him, and they turned once more back on to the Embankment. Rosina was sitting up, very pale and still shaking a little. In her face was the dumb expression of a hurt animal.

"I can't go to Philip," she said, speaking half to herself. "Will you stop the cab, please? I want to get out here."

"Don't be so foolish," he answered gruffly. "You can't get out and wander about the streets without a hat or a cloak on. Now just pull yourself together and think. Surely you have some friend you can go to?"

"There is absolutely no one," she replied. "I would go to Philip but we have quarrelled. He would never, never forgive me."

"Look here," he said, after a moment's pause, "how old are you?"

"Nineteen," she told him. "Why?"

"Well, I'm thirty-nine. Look at me. Can you trust me?"

"Yes!" she answered, without hesitation.

For a moment he smiled. There were a great many lines in his face, and many people in London and New York who had things to say about him. There were even some amongst his men friends who would have considered Rosina's reply an excellent joke.

"Very well," he said, "sit tight and I'll find you a place to sleep in."

He redirected the cabman, and they turned presently into the courtyard of the Savoy. Rosina trembled for a moment, but she asked no questions and followed her companion out. He led the way to the lift, summoned a sleepy attendant, and got out at the fourth floor. Rosina followed him along the corridor with beating heart. Presently he turned the handle of a door and they stood in a

tiny, square hall. He turned another handle and opened the door of a little sitting room.

"You go in there whilst I tackle Jane," he directed. "Don't be frightened if she shouts at you. She's all right."

Rosina obeyed, speechless now with mingled relief and apprehension. Erwen knocked at the other door leading out of the little hall. Presently there was the sound of voices, one of them at first sleepy, then angry, finally resigned. Then the inner door at the far end of the sitting room was suddenly opened, and a short, stout woman, with a cap bound around her cropped grey hair, thrust in her head for a moment. Her voice was gruff, and she spoke with an extraordinary American accent, but there was a certain kindliness in her tone which almost brought the tears to Rosina's eyes.

"Here, my child, I don't know who you are, and I don't want to to-night. I'm so damned sleepy, I could have wrung Duggie's neck when he woke me. Here's a dressing gown and a nightdress, and the door opposite leads into the bathroom. Guess you'll have to curl up on the sofa. Best I can do for you, anyway. Don't make a noise and stay there quietly in the morning until I come in for breakfast."

The door was closed before Rosina could utter a word of thanks. Erwen thrust in his head from the outer door.

"You're all right now, little girl," he said consolingly. "That's Jane McAlister, my dramatic agent. She's a holy terror but she's a white woman, and she's as good-natured as they make 'em. Good night!"

Rosina's eyes were suddenly filled with welcome tears.

"I've been so foolish," she faltered, "and I've given every one so much trouble."

"Rubbish!" he answered. "You're all right now, any-

way. Be as quiet as you can. Jane loves her sleep."

He closed the door softly, and she heard the rattle of the lift in the distance, as he descended. In the inner room, Jane McAlister had recommenced to snore.

CHAPTER XIII

It seemed to Philip, in the first moments of his awakening on the following morning, that every bitterness and humiliation which the world could hold had already found its way into his life. The very sight of his room, mercilessly revealed by the sunlight which flooded its way in through the uncurtained window, brought a groan to his lips. The apartment reeked with the smell of whisky and stale tobacco. An empty bottle stood upon the table. Some of his clothes lay in a heap upon the floor, others were flung across the bed. The bare deal furniture looked more squalid than ever. The few little evidences of Rosina's anxious care were swept out of existence. The handful of cheap flowers had perished from want of water. The clean cloth upon which his toilet things had been set out lay in the corner of the room where he had thrown it, already grimy with the accumulated dust which no fingers, however persevering, seemed able to collect. And, grimmest tragedy of all, there, where his heel had striven to grind it into the floor, lay the first copy of the magazine which was to have heralded his appearance into a new life, the magazine which was to have given to the world the first fruits of his brain, the miserable little packet which he had found awaiting him when he had come home to prepare for the long-looked-for evening with Rosina.

He staggered out of bed, oppressed with a cloud of distasteful memories, threw open wide the window, stripped and washed as well as he could, and commenced to make a partial toilet. When he was sufficiently dressed, he

turned his back upon the ugliness and disorder behind, and, with the despised magazine in his hand, he stood before the window, from which, over a wilderness of slate roofs and a few interposing chimneys, he could catch a fitful view of the river. He studied the magazine and its contents carefully, striving to free himself from the first agony of disappointment, to bring a judicious toleration to bear upon the wretched paper, the cheap illustrations, the poor type and frequent errors, which betokened slovenly production. He gazed at his own name, studied the distorted illustrations of these first creatures of his fancy, until finally the paper-covered volume slipped from his fingers, discarded without passion this time, but perhaps with even more of real and bitter despair. This defilement of his work, this hideous drop from all his buoyant imaginings, seemed somehow to lie in some sordid and melancholy apposition to the material squalor of his surroundings, his own tangled feelings, the depressing misery of the day-by-day life into which he had drifted.

He was very young and he was extraordinarily foolish, but he had the saving grace of being able to look the truth in the face. He knew quite well where he stood. He traced his descent from the high places, a gradual but none the less assured descent, from the day of his first meeting with Homan. He remembered the older man's derision of his perhaps too fanciful and illusionary outlook upon life, and the romantic work which had been the outcome of his mental attitude; called to mind his continued demands for the stuff that would sell, his gibes at the beginner's loftier aspirations, unfolded, perhaps, under an unworthy stimulus, and losing, on every occasion, much of their vitality and freshness from the continual lava of Homan's cynicism. He thought of the poems which he had not even dared to offer; of the play,

scarcely begun; of the novel which he had not touched for months — work which surely belonged to some other person, who had written with clean hands and upturned face. He thought with horror of the habit which had grown upon him under Homan's tuition, the false glow of content which it had produced, the specious optimism begotten of vulgar carouses amongst the flotsam and jetsam of the world of ready-made letters, the weaklings cast up by the great tide. Strength had been given him to climb, and he had taken his first step with cynical deliberation down the ladder of failure.

It was across the paraphernalia of his disgraceful room that he turned at last to face the intruder, whose knockings he had heard for some time with purely mechanical inattention. Sombre as ever, dressed in the darkest grey, with his inevitable black bow tie, an ash stick in his ungloved hand, his wide-brimmed felt hat still upon his head, Benjamin Stone stood upon the threshold. He looked steadily across at his ward. Neither of the two embarked upon any form of greeting. After a brief pause, he closed the door behind him and came slowly forward.

"You are ill-housed, Philip," he remarked.

"I do not expect visitors here, or receive them if I can help it," Philip answered churlishly. "How did you find me out?"

"From Matthew," was the curt reply. "I hear that you three have parted company."

"Matthew has grown too prosperous for us," Philip observed. "He has rooms somewhere in the West End. I — well, you see how and where I live. Rosina is at a girls' hostel in Westminster."

"It is because of Rosina that I am here," Benjamin Stone said slowly. "I have heard a terrible thing about her. Will you tell me where she is to be found?"

Anything to escape from where he was! It seemed, indeed, the last drop in the cup of his humiliation that Benjamin Stone should see this room, with its shameful evidences of debauchery. Philip caught up his hat.

"I was going to see her this morning myself," he announced. "You can come with me, if you wish."

Benjamin Stone pointed with the gnarled end of his stick towards the empty bottle which lay upon its side.

"You have not been long in finding out one of God's greatest curses," he said. "Are you a drunkard as well as a sloven?"

Philip showed no signs of offence. He flinched a little, and closed the door of the room behind him, as they stepped out on to the landing, with an air of relief.

"It's a filthy room," he admitted, "and I made rather an ass of myself last night. I took Rosina to a party and I behaved badly. That's why I'm glad to be going to see her this morning."

They descended to the street and turned towards the Embankment.

"It's Rosina I'm somewhat anxious about," Benjamin Stone declared, as they walked along. "You two lads are no load upon my conscience. You chose your ways and you must abide by them. Matthew, to all appearance, has done well, and you're likely to do as ill, but that's just the way of things. Matthew's got the taste for steady living and steady working. You've got the wild spirit of your mother in your blood, and I doubt you'll end as badly as she did. You had the shelter of my roof as long as you wanted it, and the truth from me when you left it. Have you anything on your conscience, Philip Garth?"

"Not with regard to you," was the unhesitating reply.

His companion looked at him sternly.

"There's nothing that you'd sleep better at nights for

telling me," he went on, "here, where there's no one but the gulls to hear — a secret between you and me?"

"Nothing whatever! What should there be?"

The frown on Benjamin Stone's face deepened. Tall though Philip was, his companion seemed to be looking down into the depths of his eyes.

"You've no sin upon your conscience? Nothing you'd like to speak of with reference to your last few hours in Norchester? God forbid that I should bribe a sinner to confess, but it may be for your good to speak the truth."

Philip laughed hardly.

"Lying isn't amongst my many faults, that I know of," he said. "I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about."

Benjamin Stone looked away. They walked at least a hundred yards in silence. For a single moment, a speculative look crept into his still, grey eyes. The doubt from which it came, however, passed. When he spoke again, his tone was cold and expressionless.

"I was about to speak of Rosina," he said. "The thought of her sometimes has been a trouble to me. It was well enough for you lads to work out your destinies up here, but Rosina was my sister's child. I should have kept a firmer hand upon her."

"What have you heard that disturbs you about her?" Philip asked.

"I hear that she has gone theatre acting," was the gloomy reply. "Matthew spoke of it when I called to see him in the city."

"She had to earn money somehow, you see," Philip observed, a little bitterly. "They are giving her five pounds a week at the Garrick Theatre."

Benjamin Stone gripped his stick more tightly and groaned.

"Five pounds a week!" he repeated. "There's noth-

ing but harm can come of money earned in such a fashion."

"Beggars can't always be choosers," Philip reminded him. "Rosina and I have both spent our savings, and I have only just begun to earn a little by my writing. When it's food you need to keep you alive, and shelter to keep you from the streets, one can't afford to be too particular. I'd have worked till I dropped, to have kept Rosina from the stage. She's too beautiful, too wonderful, to come into touch with that sort of life at all. But I couldn't do it. I tried and I failed."

They reached the hostel. In reply to their enquiry for Rosina, Miss Dean herself came into the shabby little reception room. She entered with the air of one about to perform a joyful task.

"I understand," she said, addressing Benjamin Stone, "that you have come here to see Miss Vonet?"

"If it is no inconvenience, madam. The young lady is my niece."

"Miss Vonet is not here any longer," the head of the establishment announced.

"Not here?" Philip intervened, with a sudden sinking of the heart. "Why, she was here yesterday."

Miss Dean smoothed the front of her dress. She ignored Philip altogether.

"This hostel," she explained, addressing Benjamin Stone, "is maintained for the purpose of affording a safe home for young women resident in London. Our rules are not unduly strict, but they are rules which must be complied with. Directly I heard that Miss Vonet had become a chorus girl, I decided that she must leave. Miss Vonet's behaviour, however, has been such that her leaving is no longer a matter of arrangement. I was under the painful necessity of turning her away myself at half-past four this morning."

Philip gave a little cry of horror. For a moment the room swam around him. Benjamin Stone remained rigid and unmoving.

"Miss Vonet knows the rules of this establishment," the woman continued. "She had the effrontery to remain out all night, and to return here at half-past four this morning with a man in a taxicab. I refused to admit her."

"Was that your duty, madam?" Benjamin Stone asked.

"It was a duty which I owed to the other young ladies of this establishment," was the cold reply.

"Have you any idea where she is — where she went to?" Philip demanded breathlessly.

"I can only surmise," the woman answered, with a thin smile. "A messenger arrived this morning for her clothes, from the Savoy Hotel."

They found their way out into the street. Philip, conscious of the fact that, although it was past midday, he had eaten and drunk nothing, felt suddenly faint and giddy. The horrible thought which was burning in his brain, however, drove away his weakness.

"You have money in your pocket?" he asked his companion quickly.

"Money? Of what use is money?" was the bitter reply.

"You have enough for a cab, anyhow? You must have. Come!"

Philip hailed a taxi and they drove in silence to the Savoy. Benjamin Stone sat with his hands clasped upon the top of his stick, his eyes fixed upon the stream of passing people. Once or twice his lips moved, yet he had the air of seeing nothing. Philip talked incoherently all the time. He blamed himself for his temper, for not having told Rosina of his disappointment. Under his breath,

he cursed Erwen. When they had reached the hotel, he pushed past the porter and made his way to the desk.

"I want to see Mr. Douglas Erwen," he announced.

The reception clerk looked at him indifferently.

"Have you an appointment?" he enquired. "Mr. Erwen is usually very busy at this hour of the morning."

"I must see him at once," Philip insisted. "Will you send up word that Miss Vonet's uncle is here."

The young man dispatched a page. Benjamin Stone and Philip stood together in the centre of the hall, somewhat incongruous figures, for Philip's toilet had received scanty attention, and Benjamin Stone had the air of a north country divine. He was gripping his gnarled stick with fingers of iron. There was a look in his face which reminded one of the Old Testament. The people who passed back and forth looked at them with languid curiosity. Down the stairs was a vista of the restaurant, towards which straggling groups of early lunchers were already making their way. Everywhere was an air of warmth and luxury. A woman who passed, over-rouged and with bold eyes, out of which she looked at the two with an air of insolent amusement, left a trail of perfume behind her. Benjamin Stone's knuckles were white where he gripped his stick.

"He's long coming, this man, Philip," he said dourly.

Then the last thing which they had expected happened. Across the lounge, in her simple, everyday frock, Rosina came towards them. She was perfectly self-possessed, perfectly at her ease amongst these unaccustomed surroundings. Her closely bound hair shone like burnished gold as she crossed the track of a ray of sunlight. Her cheeks, however, were pale, and there was a quality about her smile which neither of them had ever seen before.

"I was in Mr. Erwen's room when your message came,"

she said, as she approached them. "I thought, perhaps, it was I whom you wanted to see."

They were speechless. This girl was a stranger to them both.

"Is this your first visit to London since we left Norchester?" she asked her uncle. "I am sorry you have had so much trouble to find me. You see, I stayed out late at a party last night, and the manageress of the hostel where I had a room refused to let me in. So Mr. Erwen brought me here."

"I want a word with this man Erwen," Benjamin Stone said, slowly recovering himself.

"My dear uncle, don't be absurd," Rosina replied. "Mr. Erwen is much too busy a man to see casual callers. Besides, what can you have to say to him?"

She looked him full in the face, a touch of insolence in her cold stare. Benjamin Stone, however, remained unmoved.

"You were in that man's charge last night," he declared stubbornly. "I will know how he acquitted himself of his trust."

Rosina laughed, and Philip again fancied that this girl was a stranger.

"Doesn't this sound a little like melodrama?" she asked easily. "If it didn't sound disrespectful, I might even enquire, uncle, what concern it is of yours?"

"What concern it is of mine?" he repeated, momentarily at a disadvantage.

"Yes! You wish me to explain? We are a little conspicuous here. Follow me, please, into this inner room."

She led them into an apartment furnished as a reading room. Here they were almost alone. Arrived at its remote end, she turned and faced them once more.

"Listen," she said, still ignoring Philip and addressing her uncle, "I have the misfortune, from your point of

view and mine, to be your niece, and I have lived in your house since I was a child. You fed me and clothed me, both rather indifferently. My education amounted to nothing. You were reputed to be a wealthy man, and you sent me to the parish school. You refused to let me learn music, painting, dancing — any of the things I longed for. You brought me up in your own starved, grey fashion. If I ought to owe you gratitude for that, I don't. When the time came that I could stand it no longer, when I left you, you let me go without a word of kindness or of warning. From that day on until now, I have seen nothing of you. What did you care what became of me? What did you do to prevent any evil that might have come? Yet now, because I stayed out all night, and because a man found me shelter, you come here in the clothes of a preacher, with the hard, cruel Scripture in your face and a stick in your hand. It's rather poor melodrama, uncle. Somehow, I can't feel the right way about it."

Benjamin Stone stood as though stricken dumb. He changed the stick from one hand to the other. There was a patch of wet on the handle, where he had been holding it. Then he opened his lips to speak, but Philip intervened.

"Rosina," he pleaded hoarsely, "I was a fool last night, but I had had a blow — a cruel disappointment. I was not myself. I ought not to have left you. I know that, but don't be cruel. Can't you see how I am suffering — how it hurts?"

She shook her head in mystified fashion. She did not falter once in the part she played.

"My dear Philip," she expostulated, "you seem to have been imbibing some of Uncle Benjamin's Drury Lane spirit. It is very nice of you both to have come and looked me up. I can assure you that I feel quite touched

that you thought it worth while. You can see for yourselves that I am both safe and well."

"Rosina!" he began once more.

"You won't mind, will you," she interrupted, "if I draw your attention to a little matter of detail? I'm afraid you had a bad night, and you seem to have got up in a hurry. You have omitted to brush your hair, or your clothes. And as for your collar — well, go and look in a mirror as soon as you have an opportunity. — I am afraid that I must go now. I am having lunch with Mr. Erwen and a friend in the grillroom."

A storm of passion flamed for a moment in Philip's cheeks and eyes.

"I will see this man Erwen before I leave the place," he declared.

Again a different Rosina faced him. Her eyes flashed. She was quiet, undaunted but convincing. Her voice was raised scarcely above a whisper, but every word was poignant and bitter.

"Philip," she said, "you may have other opportunities of meeting Mr. Erwen. For the present, I forbid either of you to intrude upon my friends. I have explained exactly how I regard the relations between us, uncle," she added, turning to him. "As for you, Philip, you have not the slightest right to interfere in my life or anything I choose to do. That is over."

Her little nod, as she turned away, was half courteous, half pleasant. It was unmistakably a nod of dismissal. She moved slowly back across the lounge and vanished into the grillroom beyond. Benjamin Stone gripped Philip by the arm.

"Show me the way out of this place, lad," he ordered.

CHAPTER XIV

Miss Jane McAlister, clad in a neat, grey travelling costume, with a plain felt hat, a large blue veil, and clutching a shiny handbag, sat in a corner of the lounge at the Savoy Hotel, a few days later, waiting for the announcement that her taxi was at the door. She was off to Paris to interview a great dramatist and attempt something in the nature of a scoop, which accounted for her barely concealed impatience. By her side Rosina was seated, also apparently ready to depart. For all her impatience, Miss McAlister remembered that she had a self-imposed duty to perform before she left, a duty which she had put off until the last possible moment. That last possible moment, however, had now arrived.

"Say, Miss Vonet," she began, turning suddenly to Rosina and taking her hand, "I want to tell you that I think you're a real nice child."

"I'm so glad," Rosina murmured, a little taken aback.

"And because I like you," Jane McAlister continued, "I am going to do what isn't much in my line — I am going to butt right in on another person's affairs. I am going to just have a word with you about Mr. Douglas Erwen."

Rosina sat and waited. It seemed to her the safest course.

"I've known Douglas," Miss McAlister went on, "since he was a baby in his country home in Connecticut. I knew him at Harvard, and I placed his first play for him when he came to New York. There isn't anything I wouldn't do for that boy, and I think he's fond of me,

but I'm going to say to you what I'd just as lief say before his face, and indeed, if he were here at the present moment, I should be talking right on, just the same. Douglas is one of the best. He's generous and kind-hearted, and he's quite capable of doing a big thing — a big-hearted thing, I mean. But he slips up, now and then, as all of us do, and when he does, there's generally a girl in it."

Rosina looked almost pleadingly at her companion. Miss Jane McAlister, however, was fairly embarked upon her task, and it would have taken more than the silent appeal of Rosina's eyes to have stopped her.

"You're one of those girls," she went on, "whom I have read about, over on this side, but haven't really believed existed. You know about as much of the world as the dunce pupil in a kindergarten class, and it's a wicked shame that you should be knocking about around here with no one to look after you. Don't be afraid that I am going to preach to you, because I'm not. We all choose our own lives, and there isn't much difference between any two of them. We have to decide for ourselves which line we mean to take up, and I guess I've met better-hearted people amongst those who've chosen the other side of the fence than those who've felt their way along the safe places. You get me?"

"I understand," Rosina murmured.

"Now Douglas Erwen did the right thing," Miss McAlister continued, "when he fetched me out of bed at four o'clock in the morning and handed you over to my charge, but I guess he's got over the uplift of it by now. What I want you to figure out for yourself is this. He is capable of doing that sort of thing once or even twice, but he's just as capable of a slip-up the other way. You don't want to trust any man, child, at your age and with your looks — not even Douglas."

Rosina was looking a little helpless, but she suddenly stretched out her hand and the other woman clasped it.

"Say, I'm glad you're taking this right," the latter went on. "It wasn't such a bad thing, perhaps, that Douglas had to go up to Manchester yesterday. Have you heard from him?"

Rosina nodded, and handed over the telegram, crumpled up in her hand, which she had received a few minutes before. It was handed in at Manchester:

> Please stay on in Miss McAlister's rooms until I return at five o'clock this afternoon.
>
> DOUGLAS ERWEN.

"What are you doing about this?" Miss McAlister asked.

Rosina pointed through the swing doors to where her modest-looking green canvas bag was awaiting its owner.

"I've packed up," she said simply. "I am leaving when you do."

"Got a room?"

"Not yet. I'll soon find one."

"Got the money to pay rent in advance?" was the next practical question.

"I have about seventeen shillings," Rosina confessed. "I had to give the maid upstairs something, and that new frock I wore on Monday night took most of my last week's money. I shall draw five pounds again on Friday."

Jane McAlister sighed.

"There's another thing I'm going to tell you, kid," she said. "I'm afraid you won't like it, but it's better for you to know. The chorus is coming out of your show at the Garrick. You'll get your five pounds this week, and perhaps next, but that will be the end of it."

Rosina's heart sank, but the blow was not altogether unexpected.

"The girls were saying last night that there was a chance of something of the sort," she admitted.

"That's another reason why I spoke to you about Douglas," Miss McAlister persisted. "He may pretend he's putting you into something else, and try to get you to accept a sort of bogus salary. Don't have anything to do with it. I've had twenty years' experience, and I can tell you that you've about as much chance of making a living on the stage as I should have. The best thing you can do is to make friends with your folk, however hard it may be, and if you can't, why, you must get another sort of job. — And there's my taxi," she went on, rising to her feet, "and you've just got to put this envelope into your pocket, and if you're real hard up against it at any time, why, just open it, and remember that you owe an old woman a trifle and pay her when you can. — Say, these porters are none too slick, are they!" she concluded, as she waddled towards the door. "I'll just make the depôt, and that's about all. Good-by and good luck!"

Miss Jane McAlister was gone in a whirl of admonitions, complaints and expostulations. Rosina stood looking after her departing taxicab with a lump in her throat and a curious sense of loneliness. She dropped the envelope into her handbag, with no thought of opening it.

"Shall I call you a cab, miss?" the porter asked.

Rosina picked up her bag. It was really ridiculously light.

"Thank you," she said, "I am not going far."

Douglas Erwen came down to the theatre that evening a little late, and made his way at once to where Rosina was standing in the wings.

"You got my telegram?" he enquired.

She nodded.

"It was very kind of you," she said.

"But you didn't wait?"

"I don't think a suite at the Savoy is a very suitable abode for me, do you?"

"It isn't half good enough."

"Well, I have found what my landlady, who has been on the stage, describes as a bed-sitter, close to New Oxford Street," she confided. "It's on the sixth storey. I have a beautiful view, a gas cooking stove, and she's going to let me have a strip of carpet next week, if she approves of me. All this for twenty-five shillings a week. If I can't earn enough to pay for that, I don't deserve to be alive."

"You know about the trouble here, then?"

She nodded.

"Of course! I've been awfully grateful for these few weeks. I don't think I'm a bit of good on the stage."

"Has Jane been talking to you?" he demanded.

"Miss McAlister has said nothing about you or me or anything that wasn't entirely sweet," she declared.

"But she has been talking?"

"She said just the sort of things to me that a nice old woman who knew the world should say to a girl who didn't."

"She's a dear, silly old juggins!" Erwen scoffed. "I suppose you're scared stiff of me now?"

"Not a bit," she laughed. "I like you far too well."

"Do you like me well enough to come and have a sandwich when the show's over?" he asked.

"Of course I do," she assured him. "I shall love to come."

"Capital! I'm glad you're not going to be absurd about things. — Why are you gazing at that box so intently?"

She turned towards him, her eyes full of amused questioning. Her fingers rested upon his arm.

"Tell me exactly what you think of those three?" she begged.

"Friends of yours?" he asked cautiously.

"I've only seen one of them before in my life."

"I pass over the youth," he decided, after a few moments' scrutiny. "He is unfortunate but he can't be helped, and I dare say, if he goes to the right sort of school and gets the right sort of dressing down, he may improve. All the same, he shouldn't sit with his hands in his pockets."

"The woman?" she whispered.

"His mother, obviously. Not at all bad-looking, of her type; opulent — by Jove, she has really fine diamonds! — a little overdressed, probably a little underbred. City man's wife, or something of that sort, I should imagine."

"And her escort?"

"Harder to place," Erwen confessed. "He goes to a good tailor and he's not bad-looking. Rather a strong face, in its way. I don't like his eyes, though. He's no fool, anyhow. Why are you interested in them?"

"Less than twelve months ago," Rosina confided, "that young man in the box, Philip Garth — you met him the other night, you know — and I came to London together to seek our fortunes. We all had an equal start. I think he's the winner, don't you?"

"I should say he's got his neck ahead," Erwen admitted. "There's your call, child. On you go, and don't look so serious about it. I'm off round to the back. See you at ten minutes past eleven."

They sat in the balcony at Ciro's, and Rosina, besides enjoying her simple supper, watched the dancing below with the keenest interest. Matthew was there with the

lady whom he had escorted to the theatre — the boy had evidently been sent home. Rosina watched with delight his stiff, correct steps when he stood up to dance — the obvious product of a modern dancing school. Once their eyes met. She smiled and waved her hand, and Matthew responded in more dignified fashion.

"Oh, dear, I've done it now!" she exclaimed, leaning back in her chair. "Of course, I ought not to have looked near him. I could see his partner ask who I was — a chorus girl having supper with a man alone! Poor Matthew! I hope I haven't spoilt his chances."

"I should say you'd improved them," Erwen replied drily. "There isn't much of the chorus girl stamp about you, especially as we understand it over in the States."

Rosina made a grimace at herself in the mirrored wall.

"I suppose I'm too shabby," she reflected.

"The hall-mark of respectability," he reminded her.

She smoothed the shiny part of her sleeve and glanced at the many-times mended gloves which lay upon the table.

"It's an unpleasant hall-mark," she sighed.

"Of a spurious state," he rejoined.

She looked at him thoughtfully. He was a personable escort, tall and broad-shouldered, with strong, intellectual face, a little tired about the eyes, his lips perhaps a trifle full, but with qualities of attractiveness beyond the ordinary modicum of good looks.

"We all three," she mused, "had respectability thrust down our throats at Norchester, from morning till night. Did I ever tell you that my uncle preached in the chapel, and conducted family prayers, kneeling upon a horsehair sofa, twice a day?"

"Holy smoke!" Erwen murmured.

"We ran away from Norchester to get rid of our glut

of the quality," she went on. "Philip is doing very well, but I rather fancy that Matthew is developing his in a different strain. I suppose they both look upon me as the black sheep who has really succeeded in our enterprise. By-the-by, did I tell you that my Uncle Benjamin and Philip both came to the Savoy on Tuesday morning?"

"I guessed it," he answered. "You took the card from the porter, you know. They asked for me, but you said it was a mistake and you went down yourself. Well, what had they to say?"

"Just what you might imagine," she replied.

"You explained everything?"

"I explained nothing."

"Say, I don't follow you," he declared. "You'd a perfectly straight tale for them, with Miss McAlister and me on hand to corroborate it. Why not let them have it?"

"I don't know," she admitted, looking across at him with rather a sad little smile upon her lips. "I did what I think I shall always do in life — I acted on impulse. I said the words I felt ready there for me to say."

"Are you going to trust to your impulse wherever you may find yourself in life?" he asked, dropping his voice a little.

"I think so," she answered meditatively.

He called for his bill a little abruptly. Rosina leaned over the balcony and watched the dancers. Matthew and his opulent-looking companion were still making their measured progress round the room. Every one down there suddenly seemed like puppets in an unreal show. She herself, in her shabby frock, her cheap little hat, her patched shoes, thrust cautiously out of sight, was the only real person in the place. She felt suddenly very lonely.

CHAPTER XV

Matthew, after a very disturbing few days spent amongst familiar but distasteful scenes, returned from Norchester a day earlier than he was expected and made his way at once to the very handsomely appointed office where the two partners of the firm, when they were in the city at all, were generally to be found. On this occasion, it happened that both were present. Mr. Nettleby, not yet settled down after his two months' absence on the Riviera, was seated in an easy-chair, smoking a cigarette and reading the *Sportsman*. Mr. Faringdon, with the air of one immersed in great affairs, was dictating some letters to a secretary.

"Good morning, Garner," the latter said, pausing for a moment from his labours. "I didn't know you were expected back so soon."

"I caught the eight o'clock train from Norchester this morning, sir," Matthew explained. "I should be glad if I could have a word with you and Mr. Nettleby."

Mr. Faringdon signified to his secretary his desire that she should withdraw. Matthew looked around to be sure that she had closed the door behind her.

"Sit down, Garner, and get on with it," Mr. Nettleby invited, laying down his paper. "I am lunching up west at a quarter past one. I believe I hear the car now."

"I would rather stand, for the present, if you don't mind, sir," Matthew replied. "I have come to tender my resignation."

"Your resignation?" Mr. Faringdon gasped.

"The devil!" Mr. Nettleby echoed.

"It is my duty," Matthew declared.

"But I don't understand this," Mr. Faringdon protested. "Are you not satisfied with your position? We were saying, only this morning, that no one has ever entered our employ and made such rapid progress as you."

"I have been more than satisfied," Matthew assured them. "I had looked forward to devoting the whole of my life and energies to the service of the firm. I have a confession to make, however, of which I am heartily ashamed."

"Goodness gracious!" Mr. Nettleby exclaimed. "You haven't been embezzling or anything, have you?"

"It is my ability, not my honesty, which is in question," Matthew replied. "I considered that I had made a matter of seven or eight thousand pounds' profit to the firm in my deal with Benjamin Stone. I looked upon myself as a keen man of business, and upon Benjamin Stone as a man in serious difficulties, driven into a corner by his own obstinacy and narrow-minded methods. I have been deceived."

"Let's hear about it, Garner," Mr. Nettleby said, "only," he added, glancing at the clock, "don't make it too long a story."

Matthew moved his position slightly and stood with his hands gripping the heavy back of one of the old-fashioned mahogany chairs. He spoke slowly but he chose his words well. There was an undernote of bitterness which crept out now and then.

"When we decided, on the figures I showed you," he began, "to manufacture for ourselves in Norchester the goods which we had been buying from Benjamin Stone and Company, and if possible to purchase that business, I went down to Norchester quietly and got into communication with Mulholland, the confidential cashier and clerk

of the firm. Mulholland is a man who has been at the factory for thirty years, and has had about three rises all that time. I know his salary, because, when I was at work there, I made it my business to know all these things — and it was a miserable one. He came to dine with me at the hotel, and directly I began to hint at what I was after, he more than met me halfway. I do not wish to take up your time, gentlemen, so I will not enter into the details of our conversation. In the end, I offered him fifty pounds to take stock at the factory quietly and hand me the results. He accepted at once. On the strength of his figures, I made my deal on your behalf with Benjamin Stone, instead of waiting and having the thing arranged by valuation in the ordinary way of business."

"You had our consent to that course," Mr. Faringdon remarked. "It was unusual, but we had the money lying idle, and the sooner the deal was carried through, the better. We — er — certainly understood, however, that you were obtaining an agreement from Benjamin Stone, undertaking that the factory should be locked up and the keys handed to you, without any goods being disturbed, the moment the deposit money was paid."

"That part of the affair was quite all right, sir," Matthew replied. "The factory was closed down within half an hour of my paying over the deposit money. It is the figures supplied to me by Mulholland that are wrong. They were deliberately compiled for purposes of deception. A lot of useless machinery was included, and the whole of the stock of leather and boots, contrary to my express request, was put down at selling and not cost prices."

"Hm! Have you seen this man Mulholland since?" Mr. Faringdon enquired.

For the first time a faint flush of colour stole into

Matthew's cheeks. The memory of that interview was not a pleasant one.

"I saw him at his house last night, sir. He admitted at once that the figures which he had given me were unreliable. His attitude was most unbusinesslike and absurd. His view was that what I had proposed to him amounted to a conspiracy against his employer, and he had therefore retaliated by furnishing me with false figures. He showed me a receipt from the Norchester Infirmary for the fifty pounds I had paid him."

Mr. Faringdon scratched his chin.

"Do you imagine," he asked, "that this fellow Stone knew that the figures which you had obtained from his clerk were inflated?"

"I should think it very likely," Matthew answered bitterly. "He's much too shrewd to admit it, though, and I am afraid that, under the circumstances, we have no redress against him. I waited for an hour and a half to see him last night, whilst he was holding some sort of a service at his chapel, and I did my best to try and get him to consent to amend the agreement. I might just as well have talked to a lump of granite."

Mr. Nettleby was polishing his eyeglass carefully with a corner of his silk handkerchief.

"Seems as though this Johnny Mulholland, or whatever his name is, has sold us a pup," he remarked.

Matthew was puzzled — the phrase was unfamiliar to him.

"If Mulholland's figures had been correct," he pointed out, "we should have made a net profit of about seven thousand pounds, besides having bought the factory and plant at a reasonable figure. As it is, I reckon that we have paid four thousand, five hundred pounds too much, which sum may have eventually to be written off as an actual loss on the transaction."

Mr. Nettleby glanced at his watch.

"Rotten bad luck," he admitted, "but isn't that about what your figures proved that we should save in a year by manufacturing instead of buying?"

"We shall save more than that," Matthew assured them, "when the factory is brought up to date."

The partners exchanged glances.

"Perhaps you would like me to leave you for a few minutes, gentlemen?" Matthew suggested.

"I scarcely think that it is necessary," Mr. Faringdon replied. "I believe that Mr. Nettleby —"

"I say let's make the best of it," the latter interrupted, "that is, if you're agreeable, Arthur?"

"I am quite agreeable," Mr. Faringdon assented. "It is a baddish blunder, of course, Garner, but it is your first, so we'll let it go at that."

"I shall do my best," Matthew promised them, "to make it up."

Mr. Nettleby took down his hat and drew on his gloves with obvious relief.

"That's all right, then," he declared. "I must come down and have a look at the place sometime, Garner, when you get it going. — Can I give you a lift anywhere, Arthur?"

"I am lunching down here, thanks," his partner replied, with an air of self-conscious virtue. "I have promised to see an Australian buyer who is coming in this afternoon. You had better be in the way too, Garner. He is looking out for boots and shoes."

"I'll toddle off, then," Mr. Nettleby said. "If I decide not to come back this afternoon, I'll telephone."

"Really no need for you to," Mr. Faringdon observed genially. "Garner has that Manchester business in hand."

"Good!" Mr. Nettleby declared. "I shall very likely

look in at Prince's for an hour, then. Must get some exercise, these days."

Matthew went back to his own little office in a thoughtful frame of mind. Following out the self-instilled precepts of his earlier days, he made it his business to know most things, and he had discovered that Mr. Nettleby's share of the profits for the last year had amounted to something like thirty thousand pounds, and Mr. Faringdon's to even a little more than that sum. Neither of these men would have been worth a clerk's wages, under ordinary conditions. If the business were worth so much when it was run practically by the staff, what might it not become under suitable leadership? He had made a bold stroke that day by treating his employers with almost unnecessary candour. The result, as he had estimated, was completely successful. It had only increased their confidence in him. In a few days he would show them how he proposed to recover that four thousand pounds, and more. He had made up his mind to get his name upon the deed of partnership by the end of the year. The firm had no need of capital, of which he had none, but of brains and initiative, with which he was well endowed. There was a way, too, by which he might pass at once from the position of a junior partner to the equal of these others. Jeremiah Ford, on his death, two years ago, had left a fortune of seven hundred thousand pounds, mostly invested in the business. Matthew, at the cost of a shilling, had read his will and had made good use of his introduction to the household. He was even that night engaged to dine with his widow, in whose name stood a goodly two thirds of the shares in the business. A matter of twenty years' difference in their ages, and half a million in their fortunes were not by any means insuperable obstacles.

In one of his rare fits of restlessness, Matthew pres-

ently left his office and embarked upon a systematic perambulation of the immense building. He passed from floor to floor of the warehousing departments, where thousands of stout shelves seemed to groan under their weight of cloth and clothing, merchandise of every description. Even though this were the statutory dinner hour, the place still seemed like a hive of industry. In every room, packers were at work; clerks in the glass-fronted offices were busy with their daybooks. He made use of the automatic lifts to traverse storey after storey. He walked for over a mile across the floors of an interminable series of rooms — some fitted with great racks full of stock, others piled to the roof with bales of raw material — over a mile of freehold premises in the heart of the City of London, premises free of mortgage, the actual property of the firm. Out in the private yard, a score of drays and vans was loading and unloading, even at this quiet hour of the day; electric cranes were at work; every mechanical device that the mind of man could conceive was there to facilitate the handling of the endless stream of cases and bales. He passed through the wonderful export department, divided into four sections — north, south, east and west; watched foreigners from every nation at work, specialists who knew the trade of the rivers of Malay, the demands from China, the needs of the South Sea Islands. And finally he descended to the ground floor, to the counting houses which had all the gravity and dignity of a banking establishment, where a hundred clerks were buried in their books, and the classic stillness was broken only by the shrill jangle of scores of typewriters. So, back to his own office to find a telephone message upon his table — Mrs. Ford hoped that Mr. Garner was back from the country and would not forget that he was dining with her that evening. Twenty years' difference in their ages — half a million of money!

Matthew, who had come in temporarily abashed from his pilgrimage, felt suddenly master of his fate again. He forgot that he had had no lunch. He took his seat before his desk and began gathering into his hand, one by one, the levers of which other hands had wearied.

CHAPTER XVI

Rosina was conscious of a little throb of disappointment when, after her hurried exit from the theatre, she reached the street to find no one waiting at the end of the covered way. It was a wet night, the majority of the theatres were not yet emptied of their audiences, and pedestrians were few. The thin, tall figure which she had looked for so eagerly was certainly nowhere in sight. She had humbled herself for nothing. Philip had neither deigned to send her a line of excuse nor to come, as she had begged him, to see her home this last night of her engagement at the theatre.

She hesitated, half inclined to go back again for a little time. The performance was not over except so far as the chorus was concerned, and some of the girls would be loitering about in the dressing rooms for the next half-hour. Although Rosina had formed no friendship with any of them, they were at least good-natured and human. The thought of these rain-splashed streets and her own comfortless little room was peculiarly distasteful. She had, indeed, half turned back when a familiar voice hailed her.

"Is that you, Rosina?"

It was not the voice which she had been longing to hear, but she turned at once to meet the man who had stepped out from under the portico of the theatre. He was carrying an umbrella to protect his silk hat and evening clothes, and he held it out to shelter her.

"Matthew!" she exclaimed. "Have you been seeing the show again?"

"As a matter of fact, I have not," he replied. "I seldom see a show twice, if I can help it. I am with some friends at the Alhambra, and I strolled across here, a few moments ago, on the chance of seeing something of you."

"That was very nice of you," she declared, without enthusiasm. "By-the-by, you haven't heard anything of Philip lately, have you?"

"Nothing at all," he answered shortly.

"I wrote and asked him to meet me here to-night," she explained. "We had a quarrel a short time ago, and I came to the conclusion that it was time we made it up."

Matthew looked around. The rain was coming down faster than ever, and pedestrians were mostly grouped together for shelter in various places.

"Well, that's your lookout," he observed. "Anyway, he's not here. I should like to talk to you sometime, Rosina. You might like to hear about Uncle Benjamin. He was at the office again yesterday — came to get the rest of his money, and seemed to want it pretty badly. He asked about you."

"Did he?" Rosina remarked, a little coldly. "I'm afraid I'm not enthusiastic about Uncle Benjamin. I'm surprised he even mentioned my name. I should have thought, after that morning at the Savoy, that he would have wiped me out of his memory."

"What morning at the Savoy?" he demanded.

She shook her head. "Too long a story!"

"Quite right," he agreed. "Besides, I must be getting back to the Alhambra. I just slipped out, on the excuse of securing a taxicab. Let's dine together to-morrow night and you can tell me all about it."

Rosina hesitated. She was at that healthy age, and full of those healthy instincts, when a good dinner is a distinct attraction. She had no other engagement, nor

was she likely to have, and the thought of a scratch meal in her bed-sitting-room was not in the least alluring. Yet for a moment she wavered. Matthew had been too clever — perhaps cunning was the better word — to wholly commit himself. He had never said a word to which she could take exception, yet every instinct which she possessed seemed to be in arms against him. He saw her hesitation, perhaps he appraised it.

"I make no promises," he said slowly, "but, of us three, I am, of course, the one who has done well. It was always a certainty, although Philip was so cock-a-hoop about his stories and his poems. I do not admit any obligation, although we were brought up together and all that, but it is possible that I might be of service not only to you but to Philip, if we had a little conversation."

"To Philip?" she repeated eagerly. "I'll come, with pleasure, Matthew. Whereabouts?"

"You seem rather fond of Ciro's," he remarked, with a meaning smile. "Will you dine with me there at eight o'clock?"

"Certainly," she agreed. "I sha'n't be smart, you know, like the lady I saw you with the other night."

"That is of no consequence," he assured her. "Besides, it would naturally be impossible. That lady has an income of twenty thousand a year. She is the widow of one of the late partners of the firm. In your way, Rosina," he added, "you will look better than any one else in the room."

He had lowered his voice a little. There was a note in it which she had never heard before, and to which she listened now with a certain uneasiness.

"Compliments from you, Matthew!" she laughed. "Don't think it necessary, please! I'll be there at eight o'clock."

Matthew raised his hat and hurried off. Rosina was

on the point of turning up Charing Cross Road when a familiar figure came hurrying down the private way from the stage door, and Douglas Erwen seized her arm with a glad whoop.

"Say, I thought I'd missed you, little girl!" he exclaimed. "They kept me so long round at the front, and you must have changed like lightning."

"I did change quickly," she admitted. "I had written and asked some one to meet me. He hasn't come and I am very disappointed."

"Why, I saw you talking to some one, didn't I?"

"It was some one else, whom I didn't particularly want to see," she replied.

"And who was the lucky person you did send for?"

"The young man whom I brought to the party — Philip Garth."

Erwen made a little grimace.

"Well," he remarked, "you can't expect me to sympathise with you. Let's get along to Ciro's and have some supper."

She shook her head.

"I don't think so to-night. I am tired and I am disappointed."

He opened the door of his car, which was waiting.

"You aren't going to walk home in this storm, anyhow," he insisted, "so get in, please."

She obeyed, and he took his place by her side.

"Where did you tell the man to drive to?" she asked.

"The Savoy," he answered firmly. "You'll have to have some supper, whether you want to or not."

"I don't see why you bother about me," she sighed. "I suppose I am hungry, though, when I come to think of it."

"Anything since luncheon?"

"A cup of tea."

"And luncheon?"

"An egg and some bread and butter."

He groaned.

"Say, do you starve yourself because you think it's the fashion to be thin?" he demanded.

"I hate starving myself," she replied. "I'm nearly always hungry, too. Now I am really going to have supper, I am delighted about it. And to-morrow night I am going to dine at Ciro's. Of course, so far as restaurants are concerned, I'm living far above my station!"

"And who the mischief are you dining at Ciro's with?"

"With Matthew Garner, the other young man with whom I was brought up. You saw him in a box at the theatre, you know. He is going to tell me things about my Calvinistic uncle, and we are going to talk over our early days at Norchester."

"I'm not particularly struck on that Matthew of yours," Erwen reflected.

"I'm not sure that I am, either," she rejoined, "but, after all, we were brought up together, and I think he means to be nice to me, in his way."

"The question is — how nice?" Erwen grumbled. "I want to be nice to you myself."

"Well, how nice do you want to be?"

She suddenly felt her hand in his strong fingers.

"Can't you guess, Rosina?" he whispered.

The car had drawn up before the entrance to the Savoy. Rosina snatched her hand away and laughed.

"I'm much too hungry for conundrums," she declared. "Can I have a really brown cutlet and some peas? And let's get a corner table where I shall be out of sight. I should have put on my other frock, only I expected to be supping with Philip at an A. B. C."

"You shall have everything you want that I can give

you," he promised, as he guided her slightly by the arm towards the bowing *maître d'hôtel.*

They had their corner table, the cutlets were done exactly as she liked them, and he made her drink a glass of wine. There was an air of languorous warmth about the room, very pleasant after the rain-swept streets outside. Rosina almost forgot her disappointment. Once, however, she started and turned pale. In the dark gulf of the courtyard, she suddenly fancied that she saw a familiar face, livid and menacing, pressed against the thick glass window.

"Who was that?" she asked quickly.

Erwen glanced carelessly out.

"Some loiterer," he answered. "There are always plenty of them about."

Her vague apprehensions disappeared. She looked around her with immense content.

"My spirits," she declared, "are rising. Soon I shall forget the tragedy of the evening. When some one writes my memoirs," she went on meditatively, "they will probably point out that mine was the briefest career on the stage ever known. Can't you write something with a real chorus in it, please?"

"Look here, Rosina," her companion said, squaring his shoulders as he leaned across the table, "if I had a show coming on, with a chorus, you should have a part if you wanted it, but, honestly, you don't amount to anything on the stage — you'd never make good. You haven't the flair for it, and never would have."

Rosina sighed.

"I never thought I was anything wonderful," she admitted, "but five pounds a week is such a lot of money to earn."

"Five pounds a week is nothing at all," he scoffed. "I wish I could give you ten times that. I could if — "

"If what?"

"If you were my sister, or some relative who would be justified in receiving an allowance from me," he replied, after a moment's somewhat singular pause.

Rosina's large eyes were filled with self-pity.

"And the only relative I have in the world doesn't seem in the least inclined to make me an allowance of any sort," she murmured. "Do you think you could adopt me, Mr. Erwen?"

"Douglas, please."

She shook her head.

"I couldn't do it. You're too great a personage."

"Rubbish! About adopting you, Rosina — well, I consent."

She gave a little sigh of relief.

"Then I needn't go and look for a post on Monday morning. The thought of that greengrocer's shop haunts me."

"Not the slightest necessity," he assured her.

"But you're going to America next week."

"You can come, too."

"I should be seasick," she declared. "Besides — after all, I am afraid you are too young to have a ward."

"I'll wear a grey wig," he suggested. "I was on the stage once. I can make up to look fifty at least."

She negatived the idea promptly.

"I hate deceit," she confessed. "No, we must wait."

"Wait? What for?"

"Until you are old enough for me to be your ward. And then, alas! I shall be too old for you to want me to be."

"You're talking nonsense," he complained irritably.

"Aren't you?" she replied, laughing at him.

He waited whilst they were served with some asparagus. Then he looked across at her.

"No!" he said firmly.

Rosina sighed in aggrieved fashion.

"That makes it so difficult. Fancy serving us with asparagus in the middle of a discussion like this! I am coming to the conclusion that you are a very bad companion for me. You are giving me extravagant tastes."

"There is nothing in the world too good for you, Rosina," he insisted.

"I love the sentiment," she replied. "I often try to feel that way myself — but there are difficulties. Imagine going out on Monday morning to look for a situation, after a meal like this!"

"Why go, then? You needn't."

"The alternative seems to be to sit in my room and wait for a situation to come to me," she pointed out. "I fancy I should soon starve."

"If you won't be my ward, will you be my secretary?"

Rosina considered the matter for a moment.

"That's quite an interesting suggestion," she acknowledged. "The trouble is that my typing really isn't good, my shorthand is worse, and my spelling is abominable."

"I'll risk all that," he assured her, a little unsteadily. "Any other objections?"

She raised her eyes and looked at him.

"Just one," she said.

His fingers were gripping the sides of the table. He leaned a little forward. The eyes into which he was gazing were surely the most beautiful in the world.

"What is it?" he demanded, almost roughly.

"That you are far too sweet and dear ever to want me to be," she told him, with a little catch in her throat.

He looked down at the tablecloth — anywhere to escape from the sweetness of her heart-troubled look. There was a plaintive note in her voice, too, which thrilled whilst

it hurt. All the structure of his little world, its flimsy edifices, its haunted chambers, its man-accepted conventions, seemed to crumble to pieces like a house of cards. There was a soft atmosphere of Paradise about their table. The rest of the restaurant was a blatant place. It seemed suddenly to become disfigured in his thoughts, and the men and women who crowded it — so many of them, alas! the friends of his daily life — a sordid and soulless crowd. He said nothing, but presently he called for the bill and signed it.

"Will you take your coffee upstairs in my sitting room?" he invited.

He had never asked her such a thing before, but she accepted without hesitation. When they walked out of the room, he seemed to be looking through the walls. He forgot to nod to his acquaintances, even to return their greetings. Several of them looked after him curiously, others whispered jestingly amongst themselves. Neither of the two were even aware of their presence. He rang the bell of the lift and handed Rosina in. Arrived on the second floor, they passed down the corridor and he threw open the door of his little sitting room. There was a fire burning in the grate, an easy-chair drawn up to it, cigarettes, magazines, the evening paper, whisky and soda — all the comforts and luxuries that his bachelor existence had demanded. He closed the door and laid his hands upon Rosina's shoulders.

"Rosina," he said, "you won't be my ward and you won't be my secretary. I think you know that I offered you those posts with only half my heart. I offer you another now with my whole heart. Will you be my wife?"

Douglas Erwen, although he had had his hours of rhapsodies, had never thought much in his life about angels, but he fancied for a single moment that he saw

one when he watched the light break into her face and the joy flash out of her eyes.

"You darling!" she cried, lifting her lips to his forehead. "Bless you for asking me! I can't — I never could. I love Philip Garth, and some day I am going to marry him."

"That — boy?"

She nodded.

"He's three years older than I am. Perhaps he'll find himself some day. If he doesn't, I sha'n't marry at all. It's silly, isn't it, but I love him. And — Douglas — bless you once more! I feel as though I had been wandering through a miserable, dark wood all the evening, and you have brought me out into the sunshine. I shall bless you for it all my life."

He moved to the fireplace and rang the bell. Then he wheeled up an easy-chair.

"Well, dear little friend," he said, "then that's over. I've rung for coffee."

CHAPTER XVII

Rosina, without doubt, had the faculty for pleasure. She enjoyed her dinner at Ciro's on the following night, even though Matthew was her somewhat stolid and at times disquietingly mysterious companion. She even enjoyed dancing with him, doing her best to impart some elasticity into his stiff but precise movements. The times which she liked least were the intervals they spent between the dances, when Matthew ventured upon occasional clumsy compliments, and, with rare gallantry, had once even possessed himself of her hand. He had at such times a somewhat portentous air, as though there were something he desired to say. It was not until the evening was well advanced, however, that Rosina, a little fatigued with dancing, gave him an opportunity.

"What has become of Philip?" he asked.

"I wish I knew," she answered sadly. "To tell you the truth, Matthew," she went on, "I have been very angry with Philip. I took him to Mr. Erwen's party at the Savoy, and he behaved very badly."

Matthew nodded.

"Go on. I want to hear all about it."

"He insisted upon leaving early," she continued, "and he refused to see me home. Then I did a very foolish thing. I stayed on there, dancing, until four o'clock. Mr. Erwen drove me back to the hostel, and, when we got there, the matron, who had always hated me, refused to let me in."

Matthew, who had been listening with indifferent politeness, was suddenly interested.

"Well, what happened?"

"Mr. Erwen took me back to the Savoy," she explained, "and knocked up a dear old lady, who let me sleep upon her sofa. I remained there for two or three days, and did a little secretarial work for her."

"Ah!" he murmured. "Go on?"

"On the first morning, if you please, Uncle Benjamin and Philip arrived at the hotel, the former with an ash stick and his usual ecclesiastical attire, and Philip looking as though he had slept in his clothes for a week. It seems that they went down to the hostel to find me and heard of my escapade from the matron. Whereupon, they came to the Savoy and demanded to see Mr. Erwen."

Matthew smiled, mirthlessly yet with obvious appreciation of the situation.

"Well?"

"I think," Rosina went on, "that for the first time in my life I really lost my temper. Philip had deserted me the night before, had behaved like a selfish pig to me, had left me outside his rooms and advised me to go back to the Savoy — this, after I had done everything I could to make the evening pleasant for him, and after he had refused even to see me home! And Uncle Benjamin — frankly, Matthew, his appearance there, with anger and suspicion written all over his face, and with Scripture trembling upon his lips, made me positively furious."

"You explained everything, of course?"

"I explained nothing," Rosina declared. "I told them both, in the plainest words I could find, what I thought of them. I let them think just what they liked, and I sent them away. That's the last I've seen of Philip."

"Serves him right," Matthew agreed heartily.

"I'm a weak creature, though," Rosina confessed,

" and I'm getting very unhappy about it. I wrote and told him that I would explain everything, and begged him to come and meet me on my last night at the theatre. As you know, he didn't come, and I haven't even heard from him. I have even humbled myself so far as to go three times to his room. Each time it was locked and he was away."

" Rosina," her companion said deliberately, " if you'll take my advice, you'll let it go at that. Philip is a wastrel. When we three left Norchester together, I could foresee the future exactly as it has turned out. Philip was bound to fail. There isn't any definite place for his sort in the world. He was bound to be a burden on some one, and, because I had no intention that that some one should be me, I broke away from both of you after the first six months."

" It was very far-seeing of you," she murmured coldly.

" I am always far-seeing," Matthew assented. " I build up my future, day by day, and I do not make mistakes. But at that time I had no intention of deserting you, Rosina. I have always told you that I was willing to be your friend."

" That is very dear of you, Matthew," she said, " but I have no claim upon you. We were brought up together, but that tie came to an end when we left Norchester. I shall struggle along all right."

" London," he pointed out, " is not a good place for a girl like you, Rosina, to attempt to ' struggle along all right.' "

" I don't think London is so bad," she rejoined. " People have been very nice to me."

" What about that fellow Erwen? " he demanded.

She smiled a little tenderly.

" Mr. Erwen has perhaps been nicer than any one," she said. " He asked me to be his wife."

Matthew set down the glass which he had been in the act of lifting to his lips. The information was a shock to him.

"Nonsense!" he exclaimed, a little harshly.

Rosina raised her eyebrows. Her impulse of anger passed at once, however. She laughed at the dismay in her companion's face.

"Don't be rude, Matthew," she enjoined. "Why shouldn't Mr. Erwen ask me to marry him? I am really quite attractive, and I have a very nice disposition."

"He asked you to marry him!" Matthew repeated.

Rosina looked her companion in the face. It was the opportunity which she had desired.

"If he cared for me, Matthew, and I believe that he does, why shouldn't he?"

"These people connected with the stage aren't very great on marriage, as a rule," he observed.

Rosina laughed lightly.

"My dear Matthew," she expostulated, "what do you know about the stage and the men and women who belong to it? Nothing at all! Neither do I, for the matter of that. But please believe this. You are busy making money, and I am, in my way, finding out something about life. The people who count, the people who are really nice, are just the same in any profession. However, we won't discuss it any longer. I dare say I could have been quite happy as Douglas Erwen's wife, only, you see, unfortunately I am one of those women who never change. Philip is my only man. I am very angry with him just now, but that really doesn't make any difference. Some day or other I shall marry him — or no one. — We must dance this one, please."

She sprang up and led him unwillingly away. The crisis was past. When they resumed their seats, the shadow of uneasiness which had rested upon her had gone.

"Tell me about the handsome lady you were here with, the other night?" she begged.

"That was Mrs. Ford," he explained. "She is the widow of one of the late partners in the firm. Her husband left her the best part of half a million."

"How wonderful!" Rosina murmured. "And you are very friendly with her?"

"It is my intention to marry her," Matthew announced.

She leaned back in her cushioned seat and laughed until the tears came into her eyes.

"You amazing person!" she cried. "Are you so fond of her already, then?"

"I am not fond of her at all," Matthew replied, a little sulkily. "I shall take very good care of her money, and I shall make her a good husband. For the rest, I am not quite so narrow as the Norchester folk. You believe I think of nothing but money. I can assure you that I intend to amuse myself."

"Of course you must amuse yourself," she assented. "You are much too clever a person not to realise that a narrow devotion to any one thing, even money-making, doesn't give you the place you want in the world. Whatever will Uncle Benjamin say when he knows that you are marrying a woman with half a million!"

"He will probably try to borrow a little," Matthew observed, with a frown of anticipatory annoyance. "I am afraid that he is in very low water."

"You will help him if he needs it, won't you?" she begged.

"I do not know," he answered cautiously. "After all, he is only fifty-four years old. He ought still to be capable of work. I may try to find him some post, if he requires it. With you, Rosina, if you required my assistance, it would be a different matter."

"But I don't — not at the present moment, at any

rate," she assured him. "I have three pounds seven in my pocket, and a mysterious packet left me by the dear old lady who took me in for the night at the Savoy. I believe it contains a bank note. If you wanted to be a perfect angel, Matthew, I would ask you to remember for a moment that Saturday afternoon when we all three lay under the pine trees and planned our escape. We were all dear friends then, weren't we? Couldn't you do something for Philip? You did mention it last night, didn't you?"

Matthew's face darkened.

"Rosina," he said, "I have been thinking the matter over, but I must tell you frankly that I have no feeling for Philip but one of contempt. He is lazy, I do not believe in his gifts, and he has no self-control. I do not like Philip. I am not disposed to help him."

"Aren't you just a little hard, Matthew?" she protested.

"One is generally hard to the person one dislikes," he admitted. "If you want help to come to Philip, you can secure it for him. I am willing to make you an allowance, if you like, in addition to whatever you may earn. If you cared for such a post, I could find you a position in the city as principal stenographer or secretary."

"With the great firm of Faringdon, Nettleby, Ford and Company?" she asked.

"No," he replied, "not with my firm."

"You dear, careful old thing!" she scoffed, good-humouredly. "I believe you're afraid of Mrs. Ford, or scandal, and you needn't be. It's kind of you to offer me help, Matthew, but I don't need any. I'm a strong young woman, with a moderate amount of independence, and the only money I care about is the money I earn, until I marry, and then I hope my husband will earn it for me."

"For Philip's sake, you wouldn't be disposed to think over — "

"Not for a moment," she interrupted hastily. "You know very well that Philip would rather starve than accept help in that fashion. If your heart prompted you to do it, and you could go to him and remind him of our life together at Norchester — after all, we were of one family — and ask to be allowed to give him a leg up for a time, until things went better — well, that would be a different matter."

"I should never do that," Matthew said doggedly.

"Then you can keep your money," she laughed. "I want to be friends with you, if I can, Matthew," she went on earnestly, "because, after all, we did live together for a good many years, and I'm perfectly certain you are not such an old money-grubber as you make yourself out to be. But if I want any help at any time, and feel that I can, I'll come to you. Let that be the end of this sort of discussion, there's a dear. I'm always afraid that we shall misunderstand one another — in some horrible fashion."

Matthew looked at his plate a little sulkily. The evening had not gone as he had anticipated. He felt, somehow or other, that he, the man of affairs, the genius of a great firm, had been kept in his place, had been forbidden even to set out the things that were in his mind, by a tact and finesse against which his own methods of arguments seemed clumsy and obvious. Rosina, in her cheap frock and with three pounds seven in her pocket, was easily his superior in that more gracious side of life which he was clever enough not to underrate. — He paid his bill with the air of a man who has made a bad bargain.

"They'll be closing in a few minutes," he said. "We may as well go, if you're ready. I'm off to Norchester by the newspaper train."

"You've been a dear to bring me and I have loved it," she declared. "I have an appointment myself soon after nine. Wish me luck, Matthew."

"Luck!" he grumbled, as he followed her out of the room. "You don't know it when you see it."

CHAPTER XVIII

Douglas Erwen came in from a round of good-by calls, winding up with a farewell dinner at Ciro's, and contemplated his little pile of luggage in the hall of the Savoy.

"Everything ready, Astill?" he asked the hall porter.

"Everything quite ready, sir," the man replied. "The special leaves Euston at ten o'clock to-morrow morning. The car will be here at nine. No need to start earlier, sir, as your place is booked through."

Erwen rang the bell for the lift and ascended to his rooms. He let himself in, closed the door behind him, entered his sitting room, and, crossing to the sideboard, mixed himself a whisky and soda. He was in the act of raising it to his lips when the communicating door of his bedroom opened. He stood staring at the intruder, half in amazement, half thrilled with that consciousness of danger which, to many men, is like an eighth sense. He set down his glass.

"Who the devil are you, and what do you want?" he demanded.

The intruder came into the room. He was tall, thin, and shabbily dressed. His cheeks were unnaturally pale, and his large, deep-set eyes were instantly familiar. He was unshaven and unkempt, and he carried without disguise a revolver in his hand. His whole appearance was that of a lunatic. Nevertheless, when he spoke, his tone was quiet and composed.

"I am Philip Garth," he announced. "You can guess what I have come for."

Erwen was no coward, but the situation was a desperate one. He measured the distance with his eye between himself and the newcomer. The revolver was slowly raised.

"Is it your intention to kill me with that thing?" he asked.

"It is!"

"You know that you will be hanged?"

"I shall not," Philip replied, unmoved. "I shall shoot myself afterwards."

"Don't rush this," Erwen begged coolly. "You are a sane man, I suppose. I am a person with a sense of justice. Why are you going to kill me — and incidentally yourself?"

"It is the old story," was the bitter reply. "I have made use of it myself in fiction, and you upon the stage — a woman."

"Rosina Vonet, I suppose?"

The pistol was raised a little higher.

"There is no need to mention her name," Philip muttered. "We both know all about it."

"We don't," Erwen assured him, — "at least you don't. Sit down in the easy-chair there and I'll tell you."

"Thank you, no!" Philip answered coldly. "There is no need for you to tell lies in the last few seconds of your life."

"There are no lies to be told," Erwen declared. "The truth is quite enough."

"The truth being," Philip said, "that she spent the night of your party, and the three succeeding days, here at this hotel; that she supped with you here a few nights ago and afterwards came up to your sitting room."

"You are well informed," Erwen remarked.

"I was outside in the courtyard," Philip went on. "They wouldn't let me in or I should have forced my way to your room. I was drunk that night. I am sober

now. Is there any message you want to leave? Be quick."

Erwen was a man of keen observation. There was something in his visitor's eyes which puzzled him. Suddenly he realised what it was. It was the whisky and soda which he had set down, untasted, and placed at the corner of the table.

"I should like to write a few lines," he said. "I won't keep you longer than I can help."

"You had better not," Philip muttered.

The writing-table was in the middle of the room. Erwen seated himself, drew a sheet of paper towards him and took up a pen. The whisky and soda was on the table, exactly behind him. Philip was about three yards away, with his back to the inner door. On the table in front of Erwen stood two little trifles which had been given him for a farewell present — one a heavy paper weight, the other a silver-framed mirror. He pushed the latter farther back impatiently, as though to make room for his blotting pad. His pen scratched across the paper. As he wrote, or pretended to write, he watched the little drama behind. Philip, without a doubt, had been suffering tortures from his enforced sobriety. The sight of the decanter and of the glass was maddening. He drew a step nearer — another step — still half watching Erwen. Then his left hand was stretched out. He raised the glass to his lips with trembling fingers. Erwen continued to write. He made his calculations carefully. The time had not yet come to act. His pen went on scratching over the rough paper. His attention seemed absorbed by the letter he was writing. Behind, the sinister figure hesitated. Then that long left arm went out towards the decanter. Silently the tumbler was half filled, there was a gurgle of soda water from the syphon. Erwen chose his moment carefully and well. Just as

Philip was raising the glass to his lips, a trifle off his balance, he leaped round with something of the old impetuosity which had made him quarterback on the Harvard football team, struck Philip's arm up and wrenched the pistol from his hand. It was all over in a matter of five or six seconds. Erwen felt the perspiration hot upon his forehead, a deep sense of thankfulness in his heart. He was no coward, but no man cares for sudden death.

From the first, Philip recognised the other's physical superiority. Deprived of his weapon, he struggled vainly for a moment and then lay inert and sullen. Erwen, who was taking no chances, felt him over to see that he had no other weapon, then opened the communicating door and threw the pistol upon the bed. When he returned, Philip rushed at him furiously, grazing his cheekbone with his fist, reaching out with his other hand for the paper weight. Erwen, however, mastered him without difficulty, flung him back upon the easy-chair, and stood over him, menacing and angry.

"Look here," he said, "let's understand one another. Is it a lunatic asylum or a prison you're looking for?"

"Neither," was the fierce reply. "I just wanted to kill you, and I shall some day, unless you kill me first."

"Why?" Erwen demanded.

"You know why!"

Then, for once in his life, Douglas Erwen let himself go in the matter of invective. He spoke without any undue hurry, but he chose his words carefully and he saw that each one performed its task. When he had finished, Philip was looking more ghastly and shaken than ever, but the madness had gone out of his face. He looked like a white man who, in a strange country, has been beaten by niggers.

"I have tried to tell you what I think of you," Erwen

wound up. "I hope it hurts. I hope you'll never forget my words till the day of your death. You're a coward and a sneak and an assassin at heart, or you wouldn't bring murder in your hands when you come to deal with the man you fancy has wronged you. You're not fit to live in the same world as the girl whose name I should be ashamed to utter in your presence. But there it is. She cares for you, so you've got to know the truth. On the early morning when I brought her back here, I placed her in the charge of an old lady who was a friend of my mother's, and she was the guest of that lady — Miss Jane McAlister — all the time she was here. The night you saw her come out of my rooms — these rooms — she had had supper with me downstairs and she was up here for less than half an hour. During that time I asked her to be my wife."

Philip's face was covered by his hands. Erwen went on relentlessly.

"I asked her to be my wife and she refused me. Ask yourself whether there could ever be a more pitiful reason for refusing an honest man — the man who cared for her. She refused me because she cared for you! I wonder what she'd say if she could see you now!"

Philip rose suddenly to his feet. His eyes were red with weeping, but there was a certain dignity in his very resignation.

"Do you mind letting me go?" he asked. "You are quite right in everything you say. I'm not fit to live. I've made the most abominable hash of things, and you've made me feel, somehow, as though I'd hurt — her — with my thoughts. I haven't really — she's above that — above me. — May I go?"

Erwen looked him up and down — a strange, pathetic figure of broken hopes and wasted ambitions. Perhaps he realised some of the tragedy of what he saw.

"Where are you going to?" he enquired. "Have you a home?"

"What does it matter?" was the despairing reply. "I should be glad if you would let me have my pistol. I will not use it against you."

"You're young to think of shooting yourself," Erwen remarked. "Miss Vonet spoke of your having ambitions, of your having written clever stories."

"Those things are past," Philip answered.

"Why?"

"You can look at me and ask that question?" Philip demanded passionately. "I'm broken. I wrote some stories that I thought were good. Some one introduced me to a man — an editor who was starting a new magazine. This is my apologia, if you like to take it as such. That man became the curse of my life. He bought my stories and published them in a filthy, ill-printed magazine, side by side with the worst trash I ever saw in my life. They were the first stories I had ever had printed. The disappointment of it nearly drove me crazy. And then he was at me all the time to write something that would sell — detective stories — any sort of melodramatic jumble, provided there were murders and thrills enough. He mocked at his public with his tongue in his cheek. He had a queer fancy to have me spend a lot of time with him, and we spent most of it in public houses, or in the bar of what he called a club. — Oh, I know I ought to have broken away, but I wanted the money. I owed Rosina money, and it hurt like hell! Then I had to live. The night I behaved like a beast at your party, and afterwards to Rosina, was the night my first story appeared in that ghastly magazine."

"Go on," Erwen invited, and for the first time there was a note of sympathy in his voice.

"The rest is even worse," Philip confessed. "I made

no sort of a fight against Homan. I put away my novel, I put away my play, I wrote no more verses. I just wrote the muck he wanted, and we spent the money together on drink. If I hadn't been living such a beastly life, I shouldn't have been so ready to believe what I did believe. I'm glad I didn't kill you. I should like to go, please, and I should like my pistol."

"How old are you?" Erwen asked.

"Twenty-three."

Erwen lit a cigarette and passed the box to Philip, who, after a brief hesitation, accepted one.

"Twenty-three," he repeated. "And at that age, knowing nothing about life, nothing about death, nothing about yourself, you talk of committing suicide, without even testing yourself, without knowing whether there's anything in you worth keeping alive. I have met knaves and fools in my time. I think that you are very nearly the biggest fool who ever bleated."

"Then the world will be the better for my absence," Philip groaned. "'Fools only cumber the ground where wise men might live!'"

"A very apt quotation, but misleading," Erwen observed drily. "You haven't proved yet whether you are a born fool or only a doer of foolish deeds. I am inclined to suspect the latter. Look me in the face, young man. I want to see whether you are honest."

Philip's eyes flashed for a moment. Then he remembered.

"I am honest," he said shortly.

"It isn't in you to care as much for Rosina Vonet as she deserves, but, according to your lights, do you care for her?"

"I do," Philip answered devoutly. "I'm a drunken, ill-tempered swine, I know, but I've never touched any other girl's fingers, or wanted to."

"Shall I give you a chance?"

"What sort of a chance? What can you do for me? I couldn't accept money — even as a loan. Rosina isn't likely to look at me again."

"I'll do better than that for you," Erwen promised. "You're quite right about Miss Vonet. After the thoughts you've been harbouring, you've no right to go near her for the present. I'll tell you what I will do, though. I'm off to America at nine o'clock to-morrow morning. I'll take you with me."

"You'll what?" Philip gasped.

"I'll take you with me," Erwen repeated. "You can act as my secretary. There's plenty of room on the steamer, as I happen to know. I'll lend you some linen. You can buy a suit of clothes in Liverpool. Bring your unfinished novel and your unfinished play, and I'll see what stuff you're made of, on the way over. One condition, mind — you take a drink with me when I ask you — no other time."

Philip rose to his feet. He was shaking in every limb, but he seemed somehow to have become transformed. The hope that shone out of his face made him look almost pitifully young.

"You mean this?" he faltered.

"Of course I do. Get your manuscripts, any clothes that are worth bringing, and be here at eight o'clock for breakfast. Do you want any money?"

"I have enough," Philip answered brokenly. "Tell me, why are you doing this?"

"For her sake," Erwen told him. "I am hoping that some day I'll be glad I did it for yours. You don't want your pistol now?"

"No, I don't want it."

"Be a man and keep tight hold of yourself. Will you have a drink before you go?"

Philip shuddered.

"No, thank you," he said. "At eight o'clock — I'll be here at eight o'clock."

Rosina received his farewell in one of two messages which were put into her hands late on the following afternoon. There were just four words, written on a flimsy telegraph form and handed in at Liverpool Docks:

Good-by. Forgive me.

PHILIP.

She opened the second message with trembling fingers. It was handed in at the same place and time, but was much longer:

> Am taking your young man to New York with me. If he has the stuff in him, will send him back to you a man. If he hasn't, shall come myself. You can trust me.
>
> DOUGLAS.

BOOK TWO

CHAPTER I

Mademoiselle Hortense Granier — whose real name, by the by, was Harriet Wells — a person of great authority in the world-famed dressmaking establishment of Mathilde, put her head in at one of the reception rooms and called to Rosina.

"Madame wants you in her office," she announced. "There being no customers present, I will say 'hurry up' instead of '*depêchez-vous!*'"

Rosina, who, during a quiet half-hour, had been practising a new dancing step in front of the mirror, brought her heels together and was suddenly serious. To be interviewed by Madame was a very undesired honour amongst the young ladies of the establishment.

"Is there anything wrong?" she asked anxiously. "I'm not in trouble, am I?"

"I don't know of anything," the other replied. "Madame's in one of her tantrums. That horrid old Egyptian has been worrying her. You're all right, though," she added encouragingly. "If the other young persons of the establishment," she went on, looking around severely, "took half as much interest in their work as you do, instead of talking about their beaux all the time, it would add greatly to the credit of the place."

Mademoiselle Hortense's criticisms were received with mingled scorn, derision and amusement by the half a dozen fashionably attired young women who were waiting to show off the creations of the house to prospective customers. Rosina, however, as she hurried away, was full

of apprehension. The memory of the last eighteen months, its bitter struggles and its constant disappointments, was like a nightmare at the back of her mind. Her courage was still undaunted, but the idea of being out of employment again, just as the winter was coming on, filled her with dread. She tried in vain to think of any fault she might have committed, any customer whom she might have sent away dissatisfied. Nevertheless, when she knocked at the door of Madame's very luxurious boudoir, her knees were trembling.

"Madame desired to see me," she murmured.

Madame, who was really a Frenchwoman, and the most famous modiste of her day, turned slowly around in her chair. She still possessed the remains of wonderful good looks, and, although her figure now defied all the aids of the masseuse and the *corsetière*, her deep brown eyes were still beautiful, and her glossy hair as black as in the days of her youth.

"Yes, I wish to speak to you, Miss Vonet," she said. "I have heard complaints."

"Complaints, Madame?" Rosina repeated, feeling that her worst fears were about to be realised. "I am very sorry. I have done my best. Please tell me — whom have I offended?"

Madame looked at her employé with slow and critical deliberation. She looked at her from head to foot, until Rosina became hot with confusion. When at last she spoke, her words were almost a relief.

"I am not complaining of your general work, Miss Vonet," she said. "You appear to give every satisfaction in the salesroom, and your figure remains exactly what we want. The complaints I have received are not serious. They have more to do with your deportment, and I am sure that, if I give you a word of advice, you will be disposed to accept it."

Rosina felt almost faint with the ending of her suspense. She recovered herself speedily, however.

"I shall welcome your advice, Madame," she assured her.

"Your position as one of the best-known mannequins of my establishment," Madame continued, "carries with it certain obligations which you are expected to fulfill. You have a choice of costumes which you are permitted to wear, suitable to any occasion. I find that, whilst my other young ladies are not slow to avail themselves of their privileges, you are seldom, if ever, seen in public."

"But, Madame, I have no friends with whom to visit fashionable places," Rosina protested.

"That is not altogether true," Madame objected. "Mr. Vaculos, who was here this morning, complained to me that he had asked you to dine and accompany him to the theatre, and that you refused."

"I do not like Mr. Vaculos," Rosina declared, with some renewal of her nervousness.

"Neither do I," Madame observed drily. "Nevertheless, a great portion of the capital with which this business is run belongs to him, and if he were to withdraw it, we should find it exceedingly difficult to continue. Do you understand me, Miss Vonet?"

"I suppose I do," Rosina admitted.

"Mr. Vaculos has never had cause to appeal to me before," Madame continued. "The one or two of my young ladies whom he has invited out have been only too glad to go. He took that little fair thing, Violet Shaw, to Ascot this year, and a sketch of her gowns appeared in several illustrated papers and proved an excellent advertisement for the firm. You see, we have to think of these things. I cannot remember for the moment that you, who have the best figure and most attractive appear-

ance of any of my girls, have ever taken advantage of your opportunities in this direction."

"I lunched twice with Lord Reginald Towers, Madame," Rosina ventured to remind her principal. "I wore the pearl-grey chiffon at the Carlton, for which you had several enquiries afterwards."

Madame nodded approvingly.

"Quite right," she assented. "I had forgotten that for the moment. It only shows what you can do when you try. Mr. Vaculos wishes you to dine with him to-night, and I desire you to wear the white tulle which came this morning from our Paris workshop. I shall drop a line, or telephone, to the representatives of one or two of the fashion papers, and if any one does speak to you about the gown, of course you know what to say."

"Madame," Rosina confessed, "I do not like to dine with Mr. Vaculos, but I like a great deal less the idea of being out of a situation. It is really your wish that I should do so?"

"It is my wish," Madame said firmly. "You must remember, Miss Vonet," she went on, "that London is a highly civilised city. I do not need to remind you, I think, that a man who has even the outside breeding of a gentleman generally behaves with a young lady according to the encouragement he receives."

Rosina laughed delightfully. There were times when she almost liked Madame.

"Then Mr. Vaculos," she declared, "will behave extraordinarily well. Is that all you wished to say, Madame?"

"That is all," Madame replied, "except that next time you see Lord Reginald, you might try and induce him to send his sisters here. Tell him that you get a commission on their custom. I will arrange something of the sort."

"I will do my best, Madame," Rosina promised.

She walked slowly back to the salesroom and sat down on a settee. There were still no customers present.

"Come and sympathise with me, every one!" she exclaimed. "I am to dine with Mr. Vaculos to-night."

"What are you to wear?" Mademoiselle Hortense demanded.

"The white tulle model," Rosina told her.

"I'm not going to sympathise with you," Miss Violet Shaw declared. "I went to Ascot two days with him, and it was rather fun. I kept on missing him in the paddock, of course, and made him very angry, and he was furious with me at dinner because he thought that I was smiling at a man I knew at the next table. I expect that's why he dropped me."

"I've been out with him," another girl remarked. "He's like all the rest but he isn't bad. He doesn't try to kiss you in the taxicab, anyhow."

"I don't believe he cares for girls at all," Mademoiselle Hortense observed. "I think he simply likes a companion, and the best-dressed one he can find."

"There's nothing mean about him, at any rate," Violet Shaw declared. "He'll send a car for you, and a bunch of orchids, and, if he takes you to a theatre, he generally has a box and plenty of chocolates."

"*Attention!*" Mademoiselle Hortense interrupted, in her best French accent. "*Bonjour, Madame!*"

The little company of girls melted away in the presence of clients. Rosina busied herself putting away some frocks. At the sound of a familiar voice, however, she turned her head. It was Matthew who stood there, looking about him with characteristic curiosity, Matthew sleek and prosperous, in the garb of the West End, the erstwhile Mrs. Ford, now his wife, by his side. Rosina was grateful for the restraint imposed upon her by the con-

ventions of the establishment. Matthew had, without a doubt, recognised her, although he showed no signs of desiring to attract her notice. He took advantage, in fact, of his wife's distraction, a few moments later, to send a warning glance across the room, to which Rosina replied with an answering look of understanding from beneath her lowered eyelids. The situation appealed to her sense of humour. A few minutes later she was one of a little string of girls parading before this very desirable customer, who it appeared was in need of evening gowns. The lady was critical, Matthew had an eye for value. Rosina, who by chance was clad in the most daring of the creations, took care to look up for his approval each time with a bland and seraphic glance. Whilst they gossiped amongst themselves in the dressing room, the girls exchanged remarks as to these prospective customers.

"She was the wife of a great city man," one girl told them, — "a Jewess, I believe."

"She was married a few months ago to this man," another remarked. "He's in the city, too. Mrs. Matthew Garner her name is now. Her husband must be twenty years younger than she is."

"Bet you she's got the money," Violet expounded. "You can always tell by the sheepish way a man looks at us whether he's afraid of his wife or not."

"As a matter of fact," Rosina announced, "he's terrified to death of me. We came from the same town in the north of England, and he used to take me out to dinner now and then, before he became a great man. Now he nearly fell over himself making signs to me — as though it were necessary!"

"We girls do see life," Violet reflected, making a grimace at herself in the looking-glass. "This ought to fetch the old woman. If she thinks she's going to look anything like me in it, though, she'll be badly had. See me

swim out, dears. I'm going to have just one tiny look at your man, Rosina — one quick, drooping glance, you know. You'll probably get a note in half an hour, asking you to take me to lunch to-morrow."

"If he's anything by way of being a city prince," a tall, dark girl murmured, looking at herself in the mirror whilst she added some finishing touches to a wonderful creation in old gold, "I shall try my favourite side glance — if Madame is looking the other way. He evidently runs to large women — that is, if he married his wife for love."

"He didn't," Rosina assured her. "He married her for half a million pounds. As a matter of fact, though, I don't think any of you have a chance. He was a little in love with me, but I didn't seem to fit in anywhere. Now that he's settled for life and sees me working here for my living, I quite expect that a wave of sentiment will sweep him off his feet — and he'll invite me to lunch."

Madame's voice was heard outside, calling for a particular dress, and gossip was abandoned. In the end, Matthew's wife purchased three gowns and departed. Madame and Mademoiselle Hortense retired to the former's sanctum to discuss some alterations that were necessary. Rosina, who had special skill in that direction, was summoned to fold and put away some opera cloaks. Violet was leaning against the chest, talking to her, when Matthew returned.

"Well, your old college chum has got a nerve!" she declared, under her breath. "Here he comes, as bold as brass!"

Rosina turned around. Matthew advanced towards her, brisk and perfectly self-composed.

"I forgot to mention," he said, "that we desire an account to be sent with the dresses, as my wife prefers to pay cash, with a suitable discount. — I am very glad to

see you, Rosina. It seems a long time since we met."

"I am very glad to see you, Matthew," she replied. "I saw you last on the day of your marriage."

"What?" he exclaimed.

"I read about it in the papers," she went on, "and I got to the church early and made friends with the verger. I was very careful," she assured him, with a faint smile. "I let him understand that I was a connection of a far-away dependent of your family, and he kindly put me in a pew with your wife's servants. I saw beautifully. A most interesting ceremony!"

Matthew was only slightly discomposed.

"I should have sent you an invitation if I had known where you were," he said. "You seemed to disappear altogether. Have you news of Philip?"

"Yes — yes," she answered, looking over her shoulder. "You must not stay here, Matthew."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"No followers allowed, eh?"

"It isn't that," she told him drily. "We could do exactly as we liked, if Madame were only sure that it wouldn't interfere with business. She would say that your wife might come back."

"And no fool, either!" he laughed. "Where do you live? Can I come and see you?"

She shook her head.

"I don't think you want to very much, Matthew," she said, "but, even if you did, it would not be possible. I share a room with another girl, and our compact about 'followers' is a little stricter than the regulations here."

"I'll write you a line, then," he promised. "Address it here, shall I? I've something to tell you about old Benjamin Stone that will make you laugh."

"No bad news, I hope?"

"Well, that depends," he answered. "He came to

me, a month or two ago, begging for any sort of work. He's night watchman at the works now — three pounds a week, less insurance. What do you think of that, when you remember the old days?"

"I think it is horrible!" Rosina declared indignantly.

Madame came smiling from her counting room, and Matthew, unabashed, turned away to discuss the question of discount with her. Rosina made her escape. She shook her head at the little volley of chaff which greeted her from the inner room.

"Lunch or dinner?" Violet enquired.

Rosina made a little grimace.

"My dears," she replied, "he's a brute!"

CHAPTER II

The day of Matthew's visit to Mathilde was also the day on which he reached the first great landmark in his upward progress. The deed of partnership had been signed that morning with much ceremony. He had the right to call himself a member of the firm of Faringdon, Nettleby, Ford and Company, merchant princes of the City of London, one of the names to which he had made his obeisance in that first pilgrimage of his to the city. It was all over, and yet, as a result of the morning's functions, he had shut himself in the very handsome private office now allotted for his sole use, a disappointed and angry man. He sat there, biting his finger nails, frowning and looking down upon the blotting paper. Who would have thought they could have been so obstinate — Faringdon, the sportsman; Nettleby, the gentlemanly ass, who frankly hated the city and everything to do with it! Yet there he was, tied up by their will, thwarted by an illogical but monumental obstinacy. He was one of the firm, a recognised and acknowledged partner; one of the firm whose balance of assets over liabilities, at that last stocktaking, stood at something like two and a half millions; whose current balance at the Bank of England was seldom less than a hundred thousand pounds. And yet he himself was to be deprived of the power which those great cheque books of the firm conferred on the man who might write in them. He could hear the echo of the little discussion, even now.

"I shall, I presume, sign for the firm when necessary?" he had asked the lawyer, almost carelessly.

The lawyer had looked at him over his spectacles in frank surprise, but he had found no time to reply. Mr. Faringdon had intervened with a directness and a dignity which he rarely made use of.

"That is not our idea at all," he declared. "As a matter of fact, it will be quite unnecessary. Mr. Nettleby and I have for long had an arrangement not to be away from London at the same time. He and I alone will sign for the firm."

"You see, my dear fellow," Mr. Nettleby had intervened, "you are not bringing any capital into the business. We've capitalised your brains, as it is, at something like a quarter of a million, when we allow you an eighth share. The actual capital belongs entirely to Faringdon and myself and your wife. There is no necessity for you to bother your head about the financial side of the business. Mr. Holmes, the cashier, was with the Bank of England for fifteen years before he came to us, and there's nothing to be saved in his department. He prepares the cheques for the various departments, and either Faringdon or I are always prepared to sign them."

"I see," Matthew had said, trying to conceal his disappointment as much as possible. "I had an idea that all partners in a firm were entitled to sign cheques or accept bills."

"As to bills," Mr. Faringdon intervened, "the question does not arise, as we have never accepted one during the whole history of the firm. As you know, both here in London and at our branches all over the world, we buy for cash and for cash only. We give credit but we never accept it. As regards the signing of cheques, Mr. Nettleby has already explained the situation. As a matter of fact, you will have quite enough to do without bothering your head about financial details."

"I'm sure of that," Matthew replied. "It was only a matter of form. I had an idea that it was usual."

"Not," the lawyer observed, "when the financial positions of the parties are so entirely different."

"What about when my share of the profits drifts into the capital account?" Matthew asked. "Or if my wife should prefer her shares in the business being brought into my name?"

"As regards the profits," Mr. Faringdon had answered, "we should beg you to pass them to your private account. The firm cannot use any more capital, and could not afford to pay you even a reasonable rate of interest. Of course, if Mrs. Garner had any idea of doing as you suggest, and the five or six hundred thousand pounds standing to her credit were placed in your name, the matter might have to be reconsidered."

Whereupon, contrary to his custom, Matthew had gone home to lunch. Mrs. Garner was very pleased to see him, and an excellent meal was served. Matthew led her afterwards into the little room in their very handsome house, which had been furnished as a smoking room for him.

"Adelaide," he announced, "there was just one small hitch in the proceedings this morning."

"I am sorry to hear that, dear," she said. "Tell me about it."

"You see," he explained, "Faringdon and Nettleby both have very large sums of money standing to their credit in the business. I have nothing at all. Consequently, although I am a partner, they have decided between them that I am not to be allowed to draw cheques."

Mrs. Garner had disposed of her voluminous figure, to her great content, in a large easy-chair, and puffed complacently at the cigarette which her dutiful husband had lit for her.

"Well, dear, does that matter?" she asked.

"Not actually," he admitted, "but it matters very much indirectly. It is an undignified position for a man to be actually a partner in a great firm like ours, and yet not be allowed to sign on behalf of the firm. I think myself that their attitude is a little ungenerous."

She deliberated upon the matter for a moment. In her younger days, the late Mr. Ford had considered her an excellent woman of business.

"Well, I don't know," she said reflectively. "I suppose Mr. Faringdon and Mr. Nettleby have about a million each in the business, and you have nothing. Why should you be able to write a cheque for their million, or even a part of it?"

"I have the brains," Matthew reminded her.

"Yes, but they can't draw on your brains," she rejoined. "What you're worth is locked up there, with no one able to get at but yourself. Perhaps they want to keep what they've got locked up, too, in a different manner."

Matthew frowned.

"I'm sorry you can't see my point of view," he said, a little irritably. "Anyhow, I can assure you that I don't like it. I like it so little that I came home on purpose to lay before you the one way in which the difficulty could be got over."

"Before me?" she repeated, a little suspiciously. "Well, what is it, Matthew?"

"Your share in the business — yours and the boy's," he reminded her, "is between five and six hundred thousand pounds. You are the boy's sole guardian, so practically it stands in your name alone. I was going to suggest that you transfer that amount — nominally, of course — to my name, so as to give me financial weight in the company."

Mrs. Garner looked at her husband for several moments in silence. A very faint smile parted her somewhat over-full, slightly becarmined lips. If ever Matthew had had any suspicions as to his wife's Semitic origin, they became in that moment certainties.

"My dear Matthew," she protested, "you are not serious!"

"Why not?" he demanded. "We are husband and wife. It's the same thing."

Mrs. Garner leaned back in her chair and laughed, silently but happily. The laugh ended in a succession of chuckles. She sat up and dabbed her eyes with a heavily beperfumed handkerchief.

"You are a very funny man, Matthew," she declared. "Personally, I think you are splendid. I am quite sure that you will make more money than Jeremiah ever did, but you will please leave mine just where it is."

"I only wanted it to stand in my name," he muttered gloomily.

"Fiddle-de-dee, my dear Matthew!" she exclaimed. "If it stands in your name, it's yours to use when you want to, and you know it. Now don't stand there glowering at me. You've done very well for yourself, and you're going to do better. I am paying ten thousand a year towards the upkeep of this house, and I've told you that, for the present, you needn't pay a penny. All that you have to look after are your own personal expenses and your clothes, and you're going to get an eighth share of the profits of one of the finest firms in the City of London. You be content with that. Remember you're only a boy yet. What are you — twenty-seven, or something of that sort? You'll be a rich man before you're thirty-five, and a millionaire by the time you're fifty. Don't rush things, Matthew."

"I want to be a millionaire a long time before I'm fifty years old," Matthew grumbled.

"So you will be, if you keep your head," she assured him. "I'm glad you came home to lunch. I'm going to my dressmaker's this afternoon, and I want you to go with me."

Matthew knew at least when to accept defeat, but after his visit to Mathilde's, he returned to the city and shut himself up in his new private office. The day, however, was shorn of some of its delights. No one knew better than he that he had no designs upon the capital of the firm. His cheque book would have been kept in perfect order, nor would he have written those few magic words — Faringdon, Nettleby, Ford and Company — upon any document of which Mr. Holmes would not have thoroughly approved. For an intensely practical person, however, the workings of Matthew's mind in this one respect were a little obscure. He was proud to walk through the streets of London, knowing himself to be a partner in a great firm, but there was something vital lacking from that position when he realised his limitations. He wanted to feel that, if he had chosen, he could have written a cheque for five figures or even six, which the Bank of England would have cashed without a moment's demur. In plain words, Matthew was unhappy because of an abstract feeling.

As the evening approached, frequent demands were made upon his energies, but, during the last half hour of his business day, he was alone again. On this occasion, for a few minutes, he gave himself up to a far more congenial task. He sent for the private ledger. By the generosity of the firm, various sums were already standing to his credit. He struck a balance roughly and rang for a clerk.

"Will you ask Mr. Holmes," he directed, "to trans-

fer two thousand pounds to my private account, early to-morrow morning."

The clerk took his instructions and withdrew. What would he have said, Matthew wondered grimly, "if he had known that that two thousand pounds practically represented every penny he, a partner in the great firm, owned! On his way home in his wife's car, which, having no use for it herself that evening, she had thoughtfully sent for him, he carefully studied the columns of a financial paper which he had bought at the first bookstall.

CHAPTER III

Rosina was spending a very pleasant, if slightly improper Sunday. She had motored to a quiet spot in the country with Reginald Towers, and they were now seated on the lawn of a secluded hotel, awaiting the preparation of luncheon. Her companion had something on his mind and chose this opportunity for getting rid of it.

"I don't like that fellow Vaculos I saw you dining with the other night," he said.

"Neither do I," Rosina agreed.

"Then why do you dine with him?"

"He orders such good dinners," Rosina admitted.

"You can always ring me up if you have nothing to do."

She dropped him the semblance of a curtsey.

"You are nearly always in Paris."

"Why choose Vaculos?" he persisted. "There must be heaps of fellows glad to take you out to dine."

She considered the matter for a moment.

"Would you really like to know the truth?" she asked.

"I should," he assented.

"Then apparently it is Mr. Vaculos's money which is at the back of Mathilde, Limited. Madame insists upon our all being polite to him."

"What a filthy shame!" the young man exclaimed.

"It is rather, isn't it?" Rosina agreed. "Sounds like 'Revelations from the West End!' in the Sunday papers. However, I am bound to say," she added thoughtfully, "that I never, in my life, dined with anybody who behaved better than Mr. Vaculos."

"Give him time," her companion muttered.

"I don't intend to," she answered. "I am going to tell him, next time he asks me, that I am engaged to a young man in America who objects to my dining out with wealthy, single men."

"You won't evade Vaculos that way, if I know anything of the brute," Reggie Towers declared. "By the by, have you heard from Duggie Erwen lately?"

"Last week. He is the greatest dear in the world."

The waiter summoned them to luncheon, but the conversation lingered around Douglas Erwen and his doings.

"Kind of special pal of yours, wasn't he?" Rosina's escort asked cautiously.

"He was nicer to me than any other man has ever been," she acknowledged, "and now he is being nice to the young man I am going to marry some day."

"Unless I chip in," Reggie Towers observed.

"It wouldn't be of the slightest use," she assured him sweetly. "I am much fonder of Philip than I could be of you."

"I don't see why," he grumbled. "I've been well brought up and I have an affectionate disposition."

"But I only want affection from one man, and you are not he," Rosina pointed out. "Besides, you move in far too exalted circles. You have a duke in the family, haven't you?"

"The governor. But I'm the fourth son."

Rosina shook her head.

"Absolutely hopeless," she declared. "My only known relative is a night watchman at three pounds a week. He was well off once and built a chapel, but he seems to have lost his money."

"After all, what is birth?" he observed, sending away his plate for more roast beef.

"Or money?" she sighed.

"Or anything except love?" he added, watching the waiter carve.

"Love," she repeated. "You don't know the meaning of the word."

He looked at her with a hurt expression.

"Don't goad me," he begged. "Remember you have to drive back in the car with me, and I really have an awfully queer feeling for you. If it isn't love, I don't know what it is."

"I am ready to hear all about it," she told him composedly, "only, if it is a real proposal, may I have it in writing?"

"Why?"

"I believe that Madame would give me a pound a week more, if she saw it. Madame isn't altogether pleased with me just now. I think Mr. Vaculos must have told her that I was dull. She calls me ineffective."

"You're a queer girl," he said suddenly.

"I'm having a beautiful luncheon," she remarked.

"Wonderful food you get sometimes at these out-of-the-way places," he observed. "Pity you don't drink beer."

She watched his tankard being replenished.

"It wouldn't go with my style," she assured him. "It looks awfully nice and cool, though. Do you mind my telling Madame that I lunched with you to-day?"

"Not a bit! You can tell her I asked you to marry me if you like."

"I won't go so far as that," she promised, "only Madame thinks I'm such a prig, and I'm not really. I like fun as much as any girl in the world. I love being taken out. But —"

"Ah! that's just where it is," he interrupted ruefully. "Brought up in a religious family, weren't you?"

"Nonconformist," she answered. "My uncle used to

say prayers every day on a horsehair sofa. I don't think that's made any difference, though," she added reflectively. "I'm one of those quaint people who are born with principles. I couldn't even get rid of them in that atmosphere."

They dawdled over luncheon and loitered about afterwards in the gardens and woods behind, to Rosina's intense delight. Their conversation ceased to exist as such. It became a spasmodic interchange of the light jargon of the day, a pursuit in which the young man excelled, and which Rosina felt in accord with her own light-heartedness. For, in her way, she was born to enjoy life. Every little expedition had its peculiar savour for her. Her face was turned so sedulously away from ugly things, her appreciation of the simplest kindness was so intense, that she had developed an effortless joy of living which sent her with light footsteps over many dreary places. She leaned back in the car, on their homeward way, with a little sigh of content. Then she suddenly patted her companion's long, brown fingers, at that moment engaged in arranging the rug about her.

"If I really am to call you 'Reggie', here goes, then," she said. "I think you're perfectly sweet to me. I don't say much about it but I do appreciate it."

"Who wouldn't be?" he observed, a little gloomily. "You're a very attractive girl — much too attractive."

"A good many people wouldn't be, and you know why," she rejoined, as they spun along the road towards London. "From the point of view of most men, I am peculiar."

"In what way?" he demanded.

"All the men I ever meet," she went on, "seem to be possessed of such affectionate dispositions. I don't know one besides your dear self — not amongst those I see nowadays, at any rate — who would trouble to take a

girl out for the whole day who doesn't care about having her hand held — and all that sort of thing."

"You're a ripping little pal," he declared.

"I love to hear you say so," she admitted, "but, even with you, I feel somehow as though I were a cheat. I feel as though I were taking something for nothing. You give me a lovely motor ride, a delightful lunch and the best part of your day. I accept everything and I say 'thank you.' It seems inadequate."

"It is always open to you to make amends," he reminded her.

"But you know perfectly well that I can't," she insisted. "I'm not apologising, because you knew it quite well before you brought me out to-day, but I don't want to seem to take everything too much for granted. I do appreciate your sweetness and I love you for it."

"I hope that other fellow will deserve what he'll get," the young man sighed.

"I think he will," Rosina replied, "but that, of course, is rather a dream of mine."

"What about next Sunday?" he asked, as they drew near London.

She shook her head.

"You're a dear to ask me," she answered, "but no! You must entertain one of these little ladies who takes life less seriously than I do."

He was silent for a few moments.

"Funny part of it is, I'm not sure that I want to," he observed. "You're rather like a tonic to a fellow, you know. One comes home from a day with you, feeling kind of all in the clouds and no end bucked up. It's unnatural, but I rather like it."

"You wouldn't for long," she sighed.

"Let's dine somewhere to-night," he suggested. "I'll show you I can see the day through, anyway."

She laughed heartily, then became suddenly grave.

"Do you know what I am doing to-night?" she asked. "I am going to a party at Mr. Vaculos's house."

"What, that swine? Good God!"

"Please don't make me more unhappy about it than I am," Rosina begged. "Besides, it's better than having to dine with him alone. There is a crowd of people going."

"Are you going by yourself?" he enquired.

She nodded.

"Yes, I hate that," she admitted, "but Violet Shaw is going with one of her numerous young men, and I don't think any of the other girls are invited."

"You needn't go alone unless you like," he declared. "I'll take you."

"You?" she exclaimed. "But you don't know Mr. Vaculos — you haven't been invited."

"Just where you're wrong, my child," he chuckled. "I don't know where I met the fellow — at a race meeting, I expect. I remember some one asked me to be civil to him — some one he'd lent a monkey to, I think it was. He's asked me to his house no end of times, but I've never dreamed of going. He sent me a card for to-night — ten-thirty till four. Supper two o'clock. That's the show, isn't it?"

"That's it," Rosina acknowledged.

"We'll have a little dinner first and go on together," he proposed. "Much better for you than going in alone. The old boy will be glad to see me, too. Might help you with the firm, what?"

"You dear!" Rosina exclaimed. "Why, I'd love to go with you! Madame will be delighted. And I am frightened of Madame," she confided. "I had rather a struggle before I found this place, and if ever I do have a nightmare, it's the fear of losing it."

"You won't lose it," he assured her. "I've three giddy sisters, all with plenty of oof. I'll send them all to Mathilde — give them a frock each to start with, if I can't get them there any other way. This is your number, isn't it? I'll bring the old bus round at eight o'clock. Sha'n't come up. You'll be able to see me out of the window."

"I won't keep you waiting a minute," she promised. "And, Reggie, I've got a lovely frock, and such a coat! They aren't mine, of course, and I'm almost terrified to wear them, but as long as I'm going with you, I'm glad. You can't think what a difference it makes."

"That's all right," he replied, a little gruffly. "Eight o'clock. I'll have a corner table at Claridge's."

Rosina found her fellow lodger lying on a couch, reading a novel. The air was heavy with cigarette smoke. Rosina threw open a window impatiently.

"Idiot!" she exclaimed. "You told me you particularly wanted to look your best to-night, and here you lie in this close room, smoking, instead of getting some exercise."

Violet laid down her book.

"My dear," she said, "my complexion does not depend upon such trifles. Besides, no gilded youth has clamoured for my society in his Rolls-Royce this afternoon. You do look well, Rosina," she added, a little enviously.

"I've had a lovely day," Rosina declared, "sunshine, and the country, and a walk in the woods which I loved, and lots of fresh air. What have you been doing?"

"I lunched with Victor at his rooms," Violet replied. "He is coming here for me, to look at my gown."

"To look at your gown?" Rosina repeated.

Violet nodded.

"I don't believe I told you about Victor, dear, did I?" she asked. "He's Celeste's principal dress designer. He

designs most of the models that we get in Paris. The gown I am going to wear to-night is one of his creations, and he wouldn't let me go out in it if there was a single thing which didn't please him. I'm afraid you'll be shocked, dear, but I know he'll insist upon putting it on for me. That part of it is purely a matter of business with him."

Rosina's first look of horror faded away almost at once.

"What a world!" she exclaimed. "A man dressmaker arranging the artistic creation of his brain on the body of his beloved!"

"I'm not his beloved — or rather, not his only one," Violet grumbled. "I wish I were. — And, Rosina?"

"My dear!"

"I did just hint to him that it was rather horrid thinking of your going alone to the party to-night, but he's the quaintest person. He has such funny prejudices. He hates being seen out with two women."

"You were a dear to think about it," Rosina declared. "As it happens, I have an escort. The young man who took me out motoring is going. Isn't it luck!"

"What, Lord Reginald Towers?"

Rosina assented.

"Not so much of it, please," she begged. "I call him Reggie now. He's such a dear thing, Violet."

"Tell me, young woman," Violet insisted, "did you know him before the day he came in with his married sister and nearly fell in a heap on the floor when he saw you?"

"I did," Rosina assured her. "I was introduced to him by the dearest friend I ever had in my life — Douglas Erwen. I was on the stage for a week or two, you know, at the Garrick. Nothing to say and nothing to do. They cut us out after a time."

"It is my belief," Violet said deliberately, "that you are a sly little cat."

Rosina dragged her friend up from the sofa.

"Go and have your bath," she ordered, "and I shall have time to do your hair for you before I have mine. Mind, I won't touch it if you smoke another cigarette before you leave here."

"Bully!" Violet exclaimed, as she made her way across the room. "Don't forget that Victor likes those little curls at the side."

CHAPTER IV

Mr. Vaculos was a merchant prince with taste, which merchant princes seldom have, and an immense reserve, which is also a rare attribute of the species. He was a man of middle height, slightly portly, with fair hair, thin almost to baldness at the top and inclined to curliness at the sides. His complexion was pale, his features undistinguished but tolerable, his eyes a light and unpleasant shade of brown. He was always dressed with the greatest care; he was deliberate in his speech and correct in his manners. To take him as he stood, there seemed to be nothing that any one could find fault with. Yet the slowness of him, his lack of colour, and the repulsion of his eyes, dominant features of his personality, probably accounted for the somewhat unpleasant nickname — "the white snail" — by which he was known throughout bohemian London.

He received his guests, on the night of the party, in a very handsome, circular apartment, supported by stone pillars, and furnished in Oriental fashion with divans and a few priceless rugs. Through the spaces between the pillars, however, were visions, on one side, of a delightful ballroom, from which strains of wonderful dance music, melodious but of the modern type, floated out; on the other, of a supper room and a quaint little bar, aglow with flowers and shaded lights. Rosina, on the whole, was somewhat relieved at her reception. They had trooped up the stairs in somewhat irregular fashion, and Mr. Vaculos had welcomed her escort with a cordiality

which was almost fulsome. As soon as he realised the situation, however, a slight but unpleasant smile disturbed the serenity of his expression. He held Rosina's hand a little longer than she thought necessary, and, with a glance at Reggie, he whispered an injunction in her ear.

"Do not have supper until I am able to join you. I have arranged a table."

Rosina nodded assent, but she shivered a little as she entered the ballroom.

"Cold?" Reggie asked, as he held out his hands.

She shook her head, already moving away to the music.

"That man," she murmured, — "he seems slimy. Let us forget him."

The evening was halfway through before Rosina saw Madame. She was alone for a moment, having insisted upon her escort's dancing with one of his theatrical acquaintances. Madame called to her across the room, and looked at her with an enigmatic smile through peering dark eyes.

"So you found an escort?" she remarked.

Rosina nodded.

"It was all right to bring him, wasn't it?" she asked. "He had an invitation. Somehow, I fancied that Mr. Vaculos did not seem altogether pleased."

Madame smiled.

"I think," she said, "that Mr. Vaculos is quite glad to have Lord Reginald amongst his guests. At the same time, I dare say he was not so pleased to have him here as your escort. Mr. Vaculos admires you very much, Miss Vonet."

"Then I wish he wouldn't," Rosina declared frankly.

Madame remained imperturbable but critical. As a matter of fact, she was not at all sure that she understood Rosina.

"Mr. Vaculos is a very wealthy man," she remarked, "and a very generous one."

Rosina smiled.

"The most important thing of all, Madame, is that he is your friend," she said. "That is why I wish to be pleasant to him."

"How old are you, child?" Madame asked.

"Twenty-one," Rosina replied.

"And you have been in London how long?"

"A little more than two years."

"And you have no relatives, I understand, or connections of any sort?"

Rosina shook her head. It seemed a strange place to be reminded of her loneliness.

"I have an uncle," she said, "but he is quite poor."

"Is my memory at fault," Madame persisted, "or did you not speaking of having had a very hard time, when I engaged you?"

"I had a terrible struggle for many months," Rosina acknowledged. "I tried so many things without success. I began to think I should never get another situation."

"You seem to have common sense," Madame observed. "Doesn't it occur to you that it is a wise thing for a girl to have one or two friends — one, even — who is wealthy? Take Mr. Vaculos, for instance. Any one in whom he took a real interest would never have any anxieties again."

The music seemed suddenly full of discords, the atmosphere heavy, the murmur of voices and laughter strained and unnatural. Rosina felt herself growing cold. Then she found her courage. She struck her little heel upon the floor.

"Friends like Mr. Vaculos would be of no service to me, Madame," she declared, "because I would rather starve than accept anything given me in that way."

"Yet," Madame continued, still critical, still unperturbed, "you are fond of pretty clothes and dancing, the theatres, all the things that make for the gaiety of life."

"I adore them," Rosina confessed. "Madame will excuse me."

Reggie, who had finished his dance and was waiting patiently, close at hand, carried her off. Madame beckoned to Vaculos, who came and sat by her side.

"You will have trouble with that girl," she warned him.

"I like trouble," he answered.

She shrugged her shoulders. Rosina was dancing, but she had not regained her colour. Presently, she and her partner disappeared into the refreshment room.

"Miss Vonet is not like any of my other girls," Madame continued thoughtfully. "She is not like any girl I have had anything to do with in my life."

"She is nevertheless attractive," Vaculos remarked.

"You men are babies," Madame declared. "You yourself are spoilt. Everything is attainable to you, so you value nothing. When something comes which is difficult, there is a new feeling stirred. Theoretically, we find puritanism absurd. Actually, we discover that it has subtle attractions."

Vaculos rose to his feet. He very seldom committed himself to an opinion about anything.

"I shall now collect our party for supper," he said.

Rosina, to her annoyance, found herself on the left of her host. She had clung to her late partner, however, with such determination that there was little left for Mr. Vaculos to do but to offer him the place on her other side. A well-known actress sat opposite. Madame was a little lower down the table. The party was well selected, and Vaculos, although a silent host, showed the necessary

amount of genius in directing the conversation. With a tact for which she felt really grateful, he avoided paying Rosina any marked attentions. Soon her first uncomfortable feeling wore off. She began to appreciate and enjoy her surroundings. She joined heartily in the laughter which followed the recital by a French comédienne of some of her droll adventures on this, her first visit to England. A distinguished English actor capped them with some reminiscences of his own when he had first played Shakespeare in Paris. He appealed, now and then, to his host.

"You ought to remember those days, Vaculos," he said. "You owned half a dozen theatres in Paris then, in the days when they were worth owning."

"Mr. Vaculos was once very unkind to me," the French comédienne complained, with a little grimace at him. "He refused me a theatre for one of my plays. Until to-night, I have never quite forgiven him."

Vaculos raised his glass.

"Let our reconciliation be complete, Madame," he begged.

Rosina found it all very delightful. She tried even to think more kindly of her host. Afterwards, yielding to the request of one of the party, a little group of them wandered over the house, passed up the wonderful marble staircase, and through suites of marvellously furnished rooms. Vaculos showed them, even, his own apartments — his bedroom, furnished with splendid but almost barbaric simplicity, his bathroom and sanctum beyond, the walls of the latter lined to the ceiling with bookcases full of rare books and folios.

"And there?" Madame asked, pointing to a door on the other side.

Vaculos took a key from his chain and unlocked it. They passed into an exquisite little sitting room and

bedroom of the Louis Seize period, all rose colour and gilt, the panelled walls hung with one or two marvellous etchings, the writing table a treasure from Versailles, priceless and unique. The bathroom was fashioned of black and white marble, the bath itself sunk from the level of the floor and extending the whole length of the apartment.

"Rather an anachronism," Vaculos murmured deprecatingly, "but the plumber's art was scarcely understood in the reign of Louis Seize."

"My dear man, it is marvellous!" Madame declared.

"Now tell me," the French actress demanded, — "I am a person without tact, perhaps, but I will know — who occupies these marvellous apartments? What princess do you keep locked up here, Monsieur Vaculos?"

He slipped the key into his pocket and led the way downstairs.

"As yet," he answered quietly, "they are unoccupied. The princess who may some day take possession of them has not yet been gracious."

Rosina suddenly gripped at Reggie's arm. She was some distance away — she had kept her eyes turned sedulously from him — yet she knew very well that the quiet gaze of the speaker had rested for a moment upon her. — The English actor turned back to his host.

"With treasures like yours, my dear Vaculos," he said, "and such a house, there is a bounden duty before you. You ought to marry."

"The idea has sometimes occurred to me," Vaculos acknowledged.

"I am a fool, a fool, a fool!" Rosina exclaimed, as her feet flashed once more on the shining floor and she gave herself up to the rhythm of the music. "Mr. Vaculos has got on my nerves. No doubt he thinks he did me a

great honour by taking me out to dinner, and I don't suppose he has even thought of me since, and yet, directly he comes near, I feel as though there were something unpleasant around. I hate the very quietness of him. If he would once raise his voice or look angry, it would be a relief. Was it my fancy — tell me, Reggie? — or did he look at me upstairs — horridly? "

Reggie grinned.

" He's got his eye on you, all right," he declared. " All that show upstairs — gilded bird cage, what? "

She almost swung herself out of his arms.

" That men should dare to think of such things! " she cried passionately.

" They always have done and always will," her partner replied equably, " especially pigs like Vaculos. It really doesn't matter much, in these days. Abductions are out of date. Self-determination is the modern motto. Nothing for you to look scared about."

" I suppose there isn't, really," she answered, half-heartedly.

The music stopped for a moment and they sat in a quiet corner.

" Be a sensible girl and a pal," he enjoined. " Tell me just what you are afraid of? "

" Frankly, then, I will," she replied. " As I told you, Madame is connected with Mr. Vaculos in business. She is under obligations to him. I am afraid of being turned away."

" You little idiot! " he scoffed. " Madame isn't such a fool. There isn't another girl with your figure, and as graceful as you to show off her beastly frocks, in all London."

" My dear," she assured him, patting his arm, " there are five hundred. They come in, looking for a place, every day. I've seen one or two of them with the same

look in their eyes that I had — and sometimes I am afraid."

"Am I not your friend?" he asked.

"Of course you are," she answered, gratefully but a little sadly. "You're a dear, sweet friend and I'm grateful to you. But if Madame sent me away, you couldn't show me where to go and earn four pounds a week."

Vaculos crossed the floor. For the first time during the evening, he deliberately approached Rosina.

"Will you give me this dance, Miss Vonet?" he asked.

She rose at once.

"Of course," she assented. "How nice of you to ask me when there are so many here!"

"It is a host's privilege, after supper," he remarked, "to choose according to his inclinations."

They moved away almost in silence. Vaculos danced correctly and with no sign of effort. He made only one casual remark, and directly the music stopped he took her back to where Reggie stood awaiting them.

"I am very much obliged, Miss Vonet," he said, with a formal bow. "You dance beautifully."

He moved away. Rosina looked after him, a little puzzled. Then she laughed at her companion.

"I am beginning to believe," she told him, "that I am a conceited ass!"

CHAPTER V

Matthew sat side by side with Rosina in a sheltered corner of Kensington Gardens. The locality was none of his choosing, but Rosina would have nothing to do with the out-of-the-way little Italian restaurant he had suggested. She was looking more attractive than ever, but Matthew was rather full of his own affairs. It was odd that in his new life there seemed to be no one at all in whom he could confide.

"Yes, I'm a partner," he reiterated, "a partner in one of the greatest of those firms whose names I pointed out to you on our first day in London. That's what I call success — solid, substantial success. But I've done even better than that."

"What do you mean by 'better than that'?" she asked.

He fanned himself gently with his silk hat. The day was warm; in the city, the heat had been almost intolerable.

"I will tell you, Rosina," he said. "You were always intelligent, although you have made life difficult for yourself by all manner of silly notions. They made me a junior partner, but my financial inferiority made the position a little difficult. It was open to me to earn anything up to twenty thousand a year — even at the present moment I am earning it — but, in the private ledger of the firm, my two partners stood for about a million apiece and I for nothing. They rubbed it in, too. They wouldn't let me sign for the firm."

She sympathised vaguely. Matthew had been longing

to tell this to some one for so long that he had forgotten her very presence and existence. She was just a listening machine. He was getting something off his chest.

"It was pretty clear to me then what I had to do. I had to make money. Well, that's in my line. I've got the touch of money-making, somehow. Money comes to me, when I whistle, like a spaniel to its master. I got together a matter of two thousand pounds, I consulted some shrewd stockbrokers, and I began what some people would call a course of speculation. It isn't speculation with me. I know what I'm doing. I see the thing through to the end before I begin. I started with that two thousand pounds. Sometimes I take my stockbroker's advice and sometimes I don't. On to-day's market prices, I am worth a hundred thousand pounds."

"Marvellous!" she murmured.

"It is marvellous," he admitted. "I don't think there is any other man who could have done it. Sometimes I bought or sold, dead against my stockbroker's advice. I was always right. I shall go on quietly as I am doing. I shall not try to make a million, but, when I have reached something like half that amount, I shall pass it to my credit in the books of the firm. I shall point out what my holding is. I shall claim an equal right with those other two selfish wastrels to sign for the firm."

"Does it mean as much as all that to you?" she asked, curiously.

"It means all that," he acknowledged. "It means power — the sense of power, Rosina. It means that I can walk down Lombard Street and chuckle to myself. I jostle against the rich men of the world. I hold my own with them on equal terms. I, Matthew Garner, with my own fingers, can write a cheque which will make them lift their hats with respect. I'm older now, Rosina, than when I talked common sense to you and Philip and you

spouted back false philosophy and sentiment to me. I was right. I cling to my tenets to-day more than ever. Money is the greatest power in the world."

"I still don't agree with you, Matthew," she protested.

He laughed scornfully.

"You — a mannequin at four pounds a week — liable to a week's notice and dire poverty at any moment! And Philip — a drunken failure here, helped out to America by charity, making a struggling living there in cheap journalism."

"He has nothing to do with cheap journalism," Rosina interrupted sharply. "He has had one or two stories published in the best magazines of America, and he has great hopes of his novel. Mr. Erwen wrote me himself that he considered Philip had a brilliant future."

"Pooh! What does it all amount to?" Matthew demanded. "Could he pay his passage home if he wanted to? Could he live in a house in Belgrave Square, as I do, keep twelve servants, ride in his own motor car, lunch and dine where he chooses, have a balance in the bank sufficient to live on for the rest of his days? Not he! However you look at it, Rosina, I am the only successful one of the three. You were a fool not to cast in your lot with mine. Even now I am willing to help you."

"Are you?" she asked, a little drily. "How can you help me? You wouldn't even give me a meal in a restaurant in the West End, for fear of being seen. I don't know why, I'm sure. I'm quite respectable, Matthew."

"I haven't a doubt of it," he growled. "All the same, one has to remember the look of things. A business man, a man of weight in the city, must never be talked about; apart from which, Rosina, my wife, who has five hundred thousand pounds in Faringdon, Nettleby, Ford and Company — five hundred thousand pounds, mind — is a very jealous woman."

"Then you are probably in for a little trouble," Rosina remarked, with a gleam of mischief in her eyes, "for here she is!"

It was Mrs. Matthew Garner, indeed, who had suddenly turned a corner and appeared before them. She carried a Pomeranian under one arm, and was followed by two others. She was taking that daily need of exercise which the doctor had recommended to her as a last safeguard against her growing obesity, and which her veterinary surgeon had insisted upon for the sake of her canine treasures. Without a moment's warning, she found herself face to face with her husband and an extraordinarily beautiful young woman.

"May I ask what you are doing here, Matthew?" she demanded, as soon as she had recovered from her astonishment.

He rose at once to his feet.

"My dear," he explained, "I was walking home from Hyde Park Corner when I met this young lady, a friend of my Norchester days — Miss Rosina Vonet, of whom you have heard me speak."

"It is unfortunate," Mrs. Garner said coldly, "that I should recognise the young person as being one of the mannequins at Mathilde's. You had every opportunity of renewing your acquaintance with her on the occasion of our visit there, but I did not notice any attempt on your part to do so. Be so good as to accompany me home."

She sailed on. Matthew's farewell to Rosina consisted of a grimace. Rosina sat on the seat and watched them disappear. She felt that she ought to have seen the humour of the situation and laughed. She somehow failed to, however. Her eyes were still dim when she got up to make her way homeward.

Madame sent for her, the next morning, to come to her

sanctum, a summons which Rosina never obeyed without a sinking of the heart. Madame was clearly annoyed, yet in a way puzzled. She bade Rosina close the door and looked at her again with that searching expression which never failed to make her uncomfortable.

"Miss Vonet," she said, "I am afraid that you and I do not understand one another."

"I am very sorry to hear that, Madame," Rosina replied.

"You affect a regularity of conduct," Madame continued, "which, in a young person of your years, and with your appearance, is somewhat unusual. You affect resentment at attentions which I must frankly own that I, at your age, should have welcomed with pride. Yet I receive this morning a letter of complaint from a valued lady customer, concerning your conduct with her husband. It seems that she brought him in here with her, a short time ago, and yesterday she found you sitting with him in Kensington Gardens. It is not your business, Miss Vonet, to sit in public places with the husbands of my clients."

"Your letter, of course, was from Mrs. Garner," Rosina said. "Her husband and I were brought up together in Norchester. My uncle was his guardian."

"If that be true," Madame asked, "how is it that, when he arrived here with his wife, you showed no sign of recognition and treated him as a perfect stranger?"

"I was a fool," Rosina admitted bitterly. "He gave me to understand that he wished not to be recognised, and, to save trouble, I fell in with his hint."

"A little unfortunate, perhaps," Madame remarked. "It makes such an explanation as you now offer sound a little ridiculous. But, to speak frankly, Miss Vonet, why in the name of common sense sit in Kensington Gar-

dens? Why not meet the man at a restaurant, or tea rooms, or have him come to your apartments? Why advertise yourself in this flagrant fashion?"

"He asked me to meet him at a restaurant in Soho, which I have heard is not a nice place," Rosina explained. "I refused to go, and simply told him that I walked in the Park or Kensington Gardens every evening after work."

Madame abandoned her study of the delinquent. She had apparently made up her mind.

"Miss Vonet," she pronounced, "I am afraid that you are a fool, and there is no place for fools in my establishment. You will please understand — "

Madame broke off in the middle of her sentence. Noiselessly as ever, unwholesomely white, sleek and immaculately dressed, Mr. Vaculos had entered the room. He looked from one to the other.

"I trust that I do not intrude, Madame," he said. "I have come to speak to you on the matter of that overdraft."

"You can go, Miss Vonet," Madame directed.

Vaculos stood before the door. His cold eyes seemed to be reading Rosina's face.

"There is something wrong here," he suggested, — "some little matter, perhaps, in which I can help?"

"I have just told Miss Vonet that she is a fool," Madame declared angrily. "I have also told her that I have no use for fools here."

Vaculos was unmoved and unsurprised. In the face of his immobility, Rosina herself remained silent.

"What is Miss Vonet's offence?" he enquired.

"Sitting in the Park with the husband of one of my best clients," Madame replied, "a jealous woman, who pays for her gowns the day she gets them."

"Indiscreet but perhaps pardonable," Vaculos ob-

served, with the slightest of frowns. "May I ask the man's name?"

"His name is Matthew Garner," Rosina intervened. "I have just explained to Madame that I was brought up with him. My uncle was his guardian."

"Under those circumstances," Vaculos said meaningly, "Miss Vonet's indiscretion does not seem serious enough to warrant dismissal."

Madame's eyes flashed fire for a moment. The pencil which she was holding snapped in two.

"Very well," she decided, "your notice is withdrawn, Miss Vonet. You have Mr. Vaculos to thank for it. In future, for heaven's sake, behave like an ordinary human being. Meet the man every day of your life, if you want to — I don't care — but don't run up against his wife. I shall have to say I have dismissed you, so keep out of the way when she comes here again."

Rosina turned towards the door. She was feeling a little dazed. She murmured a word of incoherent thanks. Vaculos quite unostentatiously opened the door for her and she passed out.

"A most opportune arrival, yours," Madame sneered.

"I agree," Vaculos murmured. "I am glad that I was in time to stop your dismissing the young woman. I have come to talk to you about Paris."

CHAPTER VI

After her turbulent few minutes with Madame, things improved with Rosina. Reggie Towers' three sisters obeyed their brother's behest, ordered gowns from Mathilde and became regular customers. Vaculos went to South America on a business trip and seemed in no great hurry to return. There was no further question of dismissal. Rosina seemed, indeed, to be in favour with Madame, who even went so far as to promise her a bonus at Christmas on the accounts of the ladies Towers. The news from Philip continued to be satisfactory. By next autumn he hoped to be able to return to London. Of Matthew she heard nothing — not even a line since his somewhat ignominious retreat with his wife in Kensington Gardens. But, wandering down Regent Street one evening after work, she came face to face with Benjamin Stone.

"Uncle!" she cried, stopping and holding out her hand.

For a moment he seemed as though he scarcely recognised her. Then, to her surprise, a look of pleasure lightened his sad face. He was, without a doubt, glad to see her.

"Rosina!" he exclaimed. "Why, you're looking well."

"Why shouldn't I be well?" she laughed. "I've had a good situation for quite a long time now, and I really think I look like keeping it. My principal has just told me that she is very pleased with me, and I am going to get four pounds ten a week from next Saturday."

"It is good money," Benjamin Stone admitted, —

"more than I am getting myself. What might the work be?"

"I'm in a dressmaker's establishment," Rosina explained. "I'm a sort of peg on which they hang the dresses. If they look nice on me, people often buy them. Sometimes, when they get them home, they're disappointed, but that isn't my fault, is it? — Uncle, I haven't told you," she went on, "how sorry I was to hear about your losses. I am sorry, really. Come and have some tea with me, and tell me all about it."

They wandered into a tea shop and found comfortable seats. Benjamin Stone was marvellously little changed. His face was perhaps a little sterner and whiter, and there may have been a few more grey hairs. His clothes, though well-kept, were shabby. He carried himself, however, with the same simple dignity, as upright as a dart, and his eyes were bright and keen.

"I am glad to have an opportunity of a few words with you, Rosina," he began. "There is something which I have desired to say for some time. I had a letter from Philip, the day he embarked for the States. I gather that we were in the wrong when we paid that visit to you at the Savoy."

Rosina laid her hand upon his.

"I was in the wrong, too," she acknowledged, "not, perhaps, so far as Philip was concerned, but I ought at any rate to have told you the truth."

"Philip wrote like one sorely ashamed of himself," Benjamin Stone continued. "I gather that it is one of your friends, too — the man who found you shelter — who is looking after Philip and giving him a fresh start."

"Douglas Erwen," she assented. "He's been such a dear to me, uncle."

Benjamin Stone nodded gravely.

"It's a hard world, this, for one like myself to under-

stand," he admitted. "He is a young man, this Mr. Douglas Erwen, and he has befriended you. Was there no question of marriage, then, between you two?"

"Mr. Erwen did ask me to marry him," she confided.

"Then why didn't you get out of all your troubles and accept his offer?" her uncle demanded. "He seems to be a man of upright character, and he has been a good friend to you."

She smiled.

"I am going to marry Philip some day," she told him.

Benjamin Stone frowned solemnly. For some reason or other, the news seemed to distress him.

"Philip will never be worthy of you," he declared.

"You don't know Philip," she assured him. "I admit that he made a bad start in London, but everything went against him and he fell into bad hands. It would never have happened if our savings had held out a short time longer, or if Matthew had not been so exacting."

Benjamin Stone winced.

"I watched the lad grow up," he persisted. "He has no ballast and he never had. He's no fit husband for you, Rosina."

"You mustn't say that, please," she protested, "because I love him and am going to marry him."

"You'll marry a —"

He stopped short in his angry speech. She waited in vain for him to finish.

"Go on," she begged.

"No, I'll not say that word," he muttered.

"You've something against Philip, though?"

"I have."

"Then tell it me? I have a right to know."

"I'll tell it you when Philip returns," he promised. "I'd like to think well of the lad, if I could, for his

father's sake, Rosina, but there's something stands between us. We'll let it be till he's here himself."

"You're a hard judge, uncle," she sighed.

"Maybe," he admitted. . . . "I've a quarter of an hour more, Rosina, before I go on my way. There's something I'd like to ask you."

She nodded.

"Anything you wish, but first tell me, is it really true, uncle, that you are night watchman at Matthew's warehouse?"

"It is quite true," he replied. "They give me three pounds a week and I am thankful for the job."

"But surely Matthew could have found you something better than that!"

"I am content," he said. "Rosina, this is what I have had in my mind to say to you. I live in a small way now, but I could afford, with everything put together, to keep at any rate a roof over your head. Will you give up this dressmaking work and come back to my care? I'll do the best I can for you. I can promise no more."

Rosina hesitated for several moments. It was not that she was in any doubt as to her reply, but she was conscious of a very real desire to avoid any risk of giving him pain. She had realised that he was very much, almost pathetically in earnest.

"It is very dear of you, uncle, to propose such a thing," she declared, "and it isn't that I mind poverty, or anything of that sort, but I'm beginning to find out what it means to be independent, and I couldn't let go. I've been gathering up my own life, bit by bit, into my own keeping. I have been terrified to death more than once. I've had horrible moments of fear and dread. There are things about my present post which I don't like, but I'm winning my way through and I couldn't give

it up — my independence, I mean. — I'd like to see just as much of you as you have time to spare," she went on, all the more earnestly as she saw the disappointment in his face. "We might go out together into the country sometimes, or walk in the parks. I'm afraid I was a little ungrateful and selfish down at Norchester. I'd try and make up for it if I could. But as to giving up work, or coming back to live with you, I couldn't. Here's my address," she concluded, scribbling on a piece of paper and passing it to him. "You can come and see me there, if you like. I share rooms with another girl. She isn't really bad, and she's going to be married in the autumn. There are lots of things we could do together — things that don't cost money, I mean."

Benjamin Stone rose a little abruptly to his feet. He seemed to be very busy looking at the clock.

"I must be on my way to the city," he announced. "I go on duty at six o'clock. I'm glad to have seen you, girl."

He left her with an abruptness which was almost surly and rode on the top of a bus to his destination, looking steadily before him with unseeing eyes. Arrived there, he found a message to report at once at Mr. Garner's private office. He made his way there and found Matthew finishing the signing of his letters. The latter glanced up at the sound of the opening of the door.

"That you, Stone?" he said. "Wait a moment."

Hat in hand, Benjamin Stone awaited his employer's pleasure. Presently the typist was dismissed. Matthew leaned back in his chair.

"You can sit down, if you like," he invited graciously. "No one else is likely to come in."

"You left word that you wished to speak to me," Benjamin Stone replied, as he drew a chair towards him.

Matthew nodded.

"I've just come back from Norchester," he said, "had three or four days there. New factory is running at full power. Five hundred gross last week."

Benjamin Stone made no comment whatever. He simply sat still and waited.

"There's more competition down there than I thought," Matthew went on. "Beddingtons and Brown Brothers, and those people Richards & Copley, seem to have gone ahead tremendously. Do you think their banks finance them?"

"I cannot tell," was the cold reply. "They were always money-making businesses."

"Yes, but it's their plant that is so amazing," Matthew observed. "Each one of those houses I have mentioned seems to have installed every machine known to the trade, on the most favourable terms. I imagined, too, that we should derive a considerable advantage there from being able to pay cash for all our leather. I can't believe that it is a fact, but I have been told that all the three firms I have mentioned do the same thing."

"They are sound business undertakings," Benjamin Stone remarked.

"I know that," Matthew assented, a little irritably, "but the fact remains that a firm of manufacturers, to be able to pay cash for their machinery, and cash for the whole of the raw material that goes into their place, must have the command of an immense amount of capital. What I can't make out is where it comes from. They are all three limited companies — forty thousand, sixty thousand, and a hundred thousand. The capital represented by those figures wouldn't be anything like enough to enable them to pay cash as they are doing."

"I can give you no information on these matters," Benjamin Stone declared.

"You haven't even heard whether it is true that an

amalgamation between the three is proposed?" Matthew enquired, looking across at the older man keenly.

"There were rumours of that, even in my day," was the grudging response. "If you have just come up from Norchester, though, you should know more about it than I do."

Matthew nodded.

"You don't hear often from your old friends, I suppose?" he said. "It's the same all the world over. You lose your money, and they scuttle as fast as they can. What about the chapel?"

"The chapel was endowed," Benjamin Stone replied.

"Well, they ought to give you back a bit out of the income," Matthew declared.

"It is not necessary," was the cold reply. "I am able to live quite well upon my salary."

Matthew looked across at him with eyes of wonder.

"God bless my soul!" he muttered. "Three pounds a week, isn't it?"

"Less insurance," the other reminded him.

"Well, things change," Matthew remarked complacently. "Would it interest you to know how much I have added to my capital account within the last six months?"

"Not particularly."

"No use being grumpy about it," Matthew went on. "I have added exactly twenty-eight thousand pounds."

Benjamin Stone said not a word. Something about his expression irritated the younger man.

"You look as though you didn't believe me," he snapped.

"It is not for me to disbelieve any man unless he is proved to be a liar," Benjamin Stone declared. "The thought that crossed my mind was that a copy of the last balance sheet of the firm was recently distributed to the

employés of the firm who are shareholders, and was there for every one to see. The net profit for the whole year was, I think, a hundred and ten thousand pounds. An eighth part of that — it is no secret, is it, that your interest is an eighth share? — amounts to something under fourteen thousand pounds."

Matthew was, for a moment, slightly discomposed.

"I suppose you think that's very clever of you," he remarked. "There's just one little thing, however, that you failed to take into account. A shrewd man to-day doesn't rely wholly upon what he makes in business."

"You mean that he may speculate?"

Matthew smiled.

"'Speculation' is the word to use when women and professional men meddle with things they know nothing about. When a man like myself goes on to the money market, he deals with certainties."

Benjamin Stone rose to his feet.

"I am sorry that I can give you no information respecting affairs in Norchester," he said. "With regard to the rest, I have never wished you three who were brought up under my charge anything but well, and I congratulate you upon your wonderful good fortune. I trust that it may continue. If you have quite finished with me now, I expect I am wanted to lock up."

Matthew nodded carelessly.

"Tell one of them to get me a taxi, as you go out," he instructed.

Benjamin Stone reached the door without reply. From the threshold he turned around.

"If I keep silence," he said, "I may be sorry for it some day. If I speak, you will probably jeer at me. You have every right to. Nevertheless, it has come to my knowledge — indirectly, maybe, but from a very sound source — that a great disturbance in the money market

is to be expected within the next few months. I am told there is to be a great fall in every description of industrial and mining shares."

Matthew stood looking at the speaker for a moment or two in genuine surprise. Then he laughed boisterously.

"Thanks!" he exclaimed. "I'll keep my eyes open. I hadn't heard of it. I had rather fancied, in fact, that things might be the other way. You've been palling up with some of the stockbrokers' office keepers, I suppose?"

"My information is probably valueless," was the quiet admission.

Matthew was in high good humour.

"Going to sell out yourself," he asked, "or are you going to work a bear on the market?"

Benjamin Stone closed the door. Matthew went out, chuckling, to his waiting taxicab.

CHAPTER VII

Matthew was evidently right. Markets went up steadily for weeks, and he continued to make money. People began to talk about a boom. Certainly prices everywhere seemed immovable. The most ordinary industrial share was hard to buy at market figures. The whole City of London, with open cheque books, seemed to be struggling to find investments. Matthew gloated over his financial papers every morning. One day he passed Benjamin Stone, as the latter was leaving the place after his night's duty.

"Slump a bit overdue, isn't it, Stone?" he remarked facetiously.

The older man half hesitated, seemed about to say something, but passed on instead with a slight salute. Matthew went happily on his way. He strolled through the crowded streets, realising with every step something of his old ambitions. He was a man of import in the greatest city in the world. He was a member of a great firm. He was one of those who understood the money markets of the world. He was passing, through sheer genius for money-making, into the ranks of the wealthy. His pilgrimage to Threadneedle Street was a self-glorified processional. When he entered his stock broker's office, clerks sprung from their stools; he was escorted like a royal personage through the crowded room in which ordinary people might wait. The senior partner, seldom to be seen, the Delphic oracle of the place, made him welcome.

"Sit down, Mr. Garner," he said. "My congratulations! You are the most wonderful diviner amongst our clientèle."

Matthew shrugged his shoulders.

"Nothing in it but common sense," he observed, "common sense and foresight. Any one ought to have been able to see what was coming."

"They're saying this morning that this is only the beginning of the boom," the stockbroker observed. "I should like to have your opinion, Mr. Garner? Your finger is on the pulse of the commercial world, so to speak. How do things seem to you?"

Matthew took a small calendar from his pocket and studied it.

"To-day is the seventh of February," he remarked. "I have gone carefully into all the conditions of trade, and I fancy you will find the present boom will last until between Easter and Whitsuntide."

"Unofficially," the stockbroker confided, "I have heard very nearly the same opinion from a high official source — some one connected with the Treasury, in fact — only this morning. Odd that you should have arrived at the same conclusion."

"The puzzle to me," Matthew pronounced, helping himself to a cigarette from the box which the stockbroker had pushed towards him, "is how men of intelligence, who have an opportunity for gauging the industrial situation, and some insight into politics, can ever misread the probable tendencies of the markets."

"They don't," the other replied. "You would be amazed, Mr. Garner, if I were to tell you the amount of money which only our regular clients have made during the last ten years, by approaching the matter in the same spirit as your own. They are not all so correct in their judgments, perhaps, but I could tell you the names of

half a dozen men in the city to-day who are round about the million mark, and who have made the greater part of their fortune by judicious buying and selling."

"Who loses the money, then?" Matthew asked curiously.

"I'll tell you," the stockbroker explained. "The money is lost by the multitude of small gamblers who go in for what really is wild-cat speculation. They gamble in mines — unproven mines, I mean — or any crazy speculation there is going which they think may bring them in a fortune for nothing. They are the sprats of the market, of course, and, fortunately for us, there are shoals and shoals of them. They lose their little bit and another takes their place. All the time, the big, understanding operator, who deals in the sound shares of the world, goes on his way making money, as make money he must."

"Very interesting," Matthew murmured. "Just how do I stand with you, Mr. Morgan?"

The stockbroker touched a hidden bell let into his table. It was a singularity of his environment that on the very handsome desk before which he sat there was no telephone, no speaking tube, absolutely nothing to indicate the fact that this was the sanctum of one of the largest dealers in stocks and shares in the City of London. But almost as he touched the bell, an inner door opened noiselessly and a man stood there upon the threshold, waiting — a tall, dark man with bright eyes and nervous manner. It was he who sat before a dozen telephones, his employer's mouthpiece and second self. It was he who, every ten minutes in busy times, himself carried into that inner office the long strip whereon changing prices were recorded.

"Mr. Garner's account, Samuels."

"Eleven thousand, two hundred and ninety-seven

pounds to credit, sir," was the unhesitating reply. "Cheque waiting here now for signature."

Matthew considered for a moment.

"Carry it forward," he directed. "I shall be dealing within the next few days."

The stockbroker nodded. His second self faded away.

Matthew took up a financial paper which he had been carrying.

"I have come to the conclusion, Mr. Morgan," he said, "that the lowest priced of what I call the legitimate stocks to-day are Home Railways."

Mr. Morgan scratched his chin.

"They are the best value of anything upon the market for large dealing," he assented. "They have only one drawback."

Matthew smiled in a superior manner.

"The fear of a strike, of course?"

"Precisely! If any one could guarantee that there would be no strike for twelve months, I should say that there would be a fifteen per cent. rise in Home Rails within the next ten days."

"I quite agree with you," Matthew declared. "I do not wish you to make use of what I am telling you, until my operations are complete, but I have special information upon the matter. I was dining last night at the house of a Cabinet Minister" — for all his cleverness and adaptability, Matthew could not refrain from a slight access of bumptiousness in his manner as he made the statement — "and after dinner, the conversation became confidential. I cannot repeat it in detail, but, from certain facts which were stated, I was able to come to the definite conclusion that there will be no strike."

The stockbroker nodded.

"You are a very fortunate man, Mr. Garner," he said.

"It is just such information as this on which men make fortunes."

"I mean to make one myself," Matthew rejoined coolly. "Last night, before I went to bed, I pencilled out the various shares amongst which I intend to distribute my operations. You will find them here, Mr. Morgan."

He took a slip of paper from his pocketbook and passed it across the table. Mr. Morgan adjusted his eyeglass and glanced it through. Matthew watched covertly for some signs of emotion in his face, for to him the operation he proposed appeared gigantic. The stockbroker, however, remained imperturbable.

"Yes, a good selection," he said. "Just five hundred thousand pounds. You will leave it to me to distribute the amount in as near as possible this proportion?"

"Do your best," Matthew acquiesced. "I fancy the later issues of the last two upon the list more than anything, but prices must of course guide you. If there are any movements, remember that, as before, I do not wish to hear a word from you at London Wall. Every communication of any sort is to be addressed to Belgrave Square."

"I quite understand," Mr. Morgan agreed. "One never even hears of your partners on the Stock Exchange."

"They are both very rich men," Matthew replied; "they are both, in fact, millionaires. They value money simply and entirely for the luxury, the sport and the freedom which it brings them. They cannot spend their incomes, and they have therefore no interest in increasing their capital. I am unlike them from two points of view. Firstly, I have not their capital; secondly, I have not their indifference to money itself."

"You'll be a richer man than either of them before you die, Mr. Garner," the stockbroker remarked.

"I intend to be a richer man than either of them before I am even middle-aged," was the confident reply.

Matthew went on his way to lunch at an expensive restaurant with his wife, who was wearing a most expensive set of sables, a hat from the most expensive milliner in London, and jewellery which seemed to surround her with a hard and unbecoming brilliance. They sat at the best table in the room, for which Matthew had duly paid in judiciously distributed tips. Their luncheon was elaborate and unnecessarily costly. The attention which they received was exceedingly gratifying to Mrs. Garner.

"There is one thing I will say about you, Matthew," she conceded. "You do understand how to take a woman about. Poor Jeremiah had just one fault — a good fault in it's way, mind — he could not bear to spend the money. He would sooner be pushed into a small table in an out-of-the-way corner, than tip the *maître d'hôtel.* He hated all tipping. He considered it parting with money unnecessarily."

"He was wrong there," Matthew declared. "I don't know where you can get a better return for your money than by parting with a five-pound note to the head waiter of a place like this. I'm a poor man, unfortunately, but I'm never afraid of spending when there's a likely return for my money, and I don't make the mistake of expecting to get something for nothing."

"You won't be a poor man long, Matthew," his wife rejoined equably. "Besides, you always have the satisfaction of knowing that you have a rich wife."

Matthew, who had not quite forgiven her for her attitude with regard to the shares, smiled a little unpleasantly.

"Yes, Adelaide," he admitted, "you're a rich woman. Whether you know how to make the best use of your money is another thing."

She, too, smiled — not, however, so mirthlessly.

"According to your ideas, I suppose," she remarked, "a woman should strip herself of everything she has in the world to line her husband's pockets."

"Nothing of the sort," he replied coldly. "My request to you to allow your shares to be registered in my name was purely a technical matter. You would have drawn your dividends as usual, and the only difference would have been that I should have occupied a more dignified position in the firm. — I was referring entirely to your personal expenditure."

"Well, what's wrong with that?" she asked, a little sharply.

"You spend a very large amount upon your clothes," he pointed out. "You also keep on adding — needlessly, I think — to your stock of jewellery. That sort of thing may give you a momentary pleasure, but it gets you nowhere. You are admittedly fond of society. If I were a woman, and possessed your income, I would guarantee that in six months I should be moving in an entirely new set. I should not, for instance, come in here without seeing a soul I knew, and have to rely upon the fashionable intelligence column of the newspapers, the next day, to tell me who our neighbours were."

"And how would you set about that?" Mrs. Garner demanded, greatly interested.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Women find out about those things," he said, "but, if you want a hint or two from me, I'll give them to you. Instead of going to a flamboyant hotel at Brighton for a month in the winter, and meeting just the same city crowd whom we entertain at home, I would take the boy to the Riviera and stay at a good hotel. One way or another, you get to know people much more easily there than here. Let it be understood that you have money

and are willing to spend it. Entertain lavishly. Take a fancy to some of the young people who belong to the right set. Make them presents, take them about in your car, take them to the restaurants where they can't afford to go. There are plenty of the people of the world you want to mix with, hungering for money and the things money buys, just as much as you are hungering to know the right sort of people. Put yourself in the way of meeting them, and let it be known that you are willing to pay for what you want. You'll get it right enough."

Mrs. Garner was almost excited.

"You're a smart fellow, Matthew," she declared. "No wonder you get on in business! I've a good mind to start for one of those foreign places next week."

"I heard of a woman, the other day," he went on, "rich, but without anything like the claims to social recognition which you possess. She went to a first-class dressmaker, who had half a dozen titled people amongst her clients who couldn't pay their bills. She was a clever woman, and she let the dressmaker know what she wanted. A little meeting took place in the dressmaker's sitting room, invitations were exchanged, the dressmaker's bills were paid, everybody was happy. And if that woman were to come in here at this moment, you'd see her smiling and bowing to most of the people at these tables. You're content with too small things, Adelaide. None of the people with whom we are on visiting terms are worth knowing, except, of course, the Rawlinsons, where we dined last night, and that was entirely my affair."

"You are absolutely right, Matthew," his wife confessed, with the light of battle already in her eyes.

"If I am to give you any further advice," Matthew went on, "I should say — drop our present set altogether. They're not a hap'orth of good to us. They're all city people, and we've gone as far as we need to in

the city already. Both my partners have refused a knighthood. It will be offered to me next year. I shall accept, simply because I want to go to Court. After that, I shall see that you are presented."

Mrs. Garner was ecstatically happy. She even pressed her husband's hand.

"Matthew dear," she said, "I love the days you come up west to lunch. What a pity you can't take a half holiday!"

"Pretty mess they'd be in if I did," he remarked complacently.

Glancing around the room, Mrs. Garner was suddenly attracted by what seemed to be a familiar face. Only a few tables away, Rosina, in one of Mathilde's latest morning confections, the acme of simplicity, but a miracle of cut and style, was lunching with Reggie Towers, who was paying one of his now infrequent visits to London. Mrs. Garner nudged her husband's arm.

"That girl's face seems familiar," she observed. "No, the one on our right — very good-looking — very stylish, too. She's lunching with a young man in grey tweeds."

Matthew recognised Rosina somewhat ruefully. Their eyes met for a moment. Rosina was looking away with a little smile when Matthew took his courage into both hands and bowed, a greeting which she returned graciously.

"You know her?" Mrs. Garner exclaimed. "Tell me at once who she is?"

"Her name is Rosina Vonet," Matthew replied. "She is the young lady I told you of, with whom I was brought up at Norchester. She has an engagement with Mathilde. You saw us talking in Kensington Gardens."

"That hussy!" Mrs. Garner broke in indignantly. "To think that she dares to come into a place like this! And with that common-looking young man, too! I never

heard such a thing. And as to your having been brought up with her at Norchester, Matthew, I simply don't believe it. You picked her up in Mathilde's shop. I saw her making eyes at you. Thank goodness, she is not there now!"

"How do you know she is not?" Matthew asked.

"Because I wrote to Madame Mathilde and told her a few plain truths. I told her I didn't want to see any frocks I might buy on that sort of person. And you dare to recognise her, Matthew! I am amazed at you."

Mrs. Garner was angry, and when she was angry she at once became hot. She summoned the head waiter, who was passing.

"Do tell me," she begged, "who are that strange-looking couple — the fifth table to the right? The girl I know is employed by my dressmaker. I can't imagine why you have such people here."

The man, who had paused deferentially, glanced towards Rosina and her companion. Then he turned back to Mrs. Garner. His smile was a little sad.

"The young lady I do not know, Madam," he announced. "She is not an habitué here. The gentleman is Lord Reginald Towers, a son of the Duke of Rochester. He is a very good patron."

"That young man?" Mrs. Garner gasped.

"Yes, Madam!"

Mrs. Garner was silent for several moments after the man's departure.

"I suppose, then, I must believe your story, Matthew," she acknowledged, a little irrelevantly. "Perhaps, on your way out, you had better stop and speak to the young woman. You might explain. Of course, if she was really brought up by your guardian, I should be sorry to have been — er — the cause of her losing her situation."

Matthew sipped his wine thoughtfully. He was watch-

ing the two young people. Curiously enough, there was an acrid cloud of jealousy in his brain. Rosina had never seemed so attractive to him.

"Better some other time," he muttered. "They don't look as though they cared about being disturbed just now. And besides — those clothes — and coming out with Lord anybody — it doesn't seem right, somehow. I must make enquiries."

Mrs. Garner smiled tolerantly.

"Quite right, Matthew dear," she assented. "Still, young people, you know — one can't close one's eyes to things altogether. The son of a duke, though! It does seem amazing!"

CHAPTER VIII

Even up to the last moment, Rosina was curiously undecided. She sat on the hearthrug of the tiny sitting room, facing Violet and twirling Matthew's note around her finger. Violet's views upon the matter were positive and freely given.

"Your other friend's away in Paris," she pointed out, "your young man's in New York — and I bet he's amusing himself some of the time — and you're such a modest little daisy that there's scarcely a man knows you well enough to ask you out. You've rung the changes on every cheap dish you can think of for dinner, for the last ten days, and to-night you admit it has to be bacon and eggs. And there you are, asked out to the Savoy to dine with a man you've known all your life, and you sit there hesitating about it! What's the matter? Aren't you hungry?"

"Of course I am," Rosina confessed. "If ever I get into serious trouble, I'm sure it will be through my appetite."

"Don't you like the man, then? He looked a bit stuffy, I thought, and frightened of his wife, but surely he won't eat you?"

"I used to like Matthew quite a great deal," Rosina admitted. "He and I and Philip — but I've told you all about that, haven't I? But somehow, Matthew, since we came to London, seems to have changed. He never even looked at me before, down at Norchester. He was more like a very unaffectionate brother. From the first, up here, he's been different. I'm terrified of doing him

an injustice, and yet, when I am alone with him, I am just as much terrified of what he's going to say next."

"Shucks!" Violet exclaimed, taking off her slipper and contemplating its worn edges a little disconsolately. "You are a greenhorn, Rosina. I think it's rather fun to get a man into a corner, and, when you know all the time what he wants to say, dare him to say it. Since I've made up my mind to marry Victor, I'm enjoying the same sort of thing myself enormously. I'm going to dine to-morrow night with Johnnie Rudd. I shall be in just the same sort of box, only worse, because I have encouraged the poor little man. You may see me sweeping home in haughty solitude. Or you may not. I think I can manage him. It's so beautifully uplifting, too, to show a man how wrong he has been in his ideas. I dare say Johnnie, for instance, will think differently of the whole sex by the time I've finished with him. You must deal with your man in the same way."

Rosina unscrewed the note from her finger and read it again. It was written from Belgrave Square, and there was a crest above the address:

> My dear Rosina:
>
> I should like to hear all about you and Philip. As you don't care about Fretoli's, will you dine with me at the Savoy to-night at eight o'clock? There will be no time for you to send a reply, so I shall expect you there. If you don't come, I must dine by myself and we must fix another evening.
>
> Ever yours,
>
> Matthew.
>
> P. S.—My wife is in Cannes.

"I suppose I'd better go," Rosina decided.

"You'll be a stupid donkey if you don't," Violet declared.

Matthew was waiting for his guest in the entrance hall of the restaurant when she arrived. He came forward with a little exclamation of pleasure — a very carefully turned out, not undistinguished-looking man, with a touch, perhaps, of the old Matthew in his welcoming smile. Rosina was suddenly glad that she had come.

"I love this place and hate it," she confided, as she descended the broad stairs by his side. "I almost fancied that I saw my dear old Jane McAlister sitting in that corner as I came in. I shall never forget her face when Mr. Erwen brought her out of bed at four o'clock in the morning!"

"He was the first of your beaux, wasn't he?" Matthew remarked.

"He was a very dear and considerate friend," she declared. "That is another of my memories here — his party on the first night of the play. It ended almost in tragedy, but it was the first time I had ever danced with any one who could dance — the first time I had ever been to a real party."

"You go to plenty nowadays, I suppose?" he queried.

She shook her head as she took her place at the little table to which she had been ushered.

"To very few," she answered. "A friend took me out to lunch, the other day — the time I saw you and your wife. Is she still angry with me, Matthew?"

"Not at all," he assured her. "She's quite got over that."

"It seems odd to think of you as married," she went on. "Somehow or other, that possibility never cropped up in our conversations about the future, did it?"

"It did not," he admitted. "I had no idea that such an opportunity would present itself. My marriage, you must understand, Rosina, was not one of affection."

"Matthew," she exclaimed, "don't say anything so horrible!"

"There is nothing horrible about it," he protested. "I married my wife because, by doing so, I consolidated my position with the firm."

"And she?" Rosina asked curiously. "What does she get out of it?"

"That is her lookout," Matthew replied. "She does not interfere with me. She is away now for two months. Naturally, I am a little lonely."

"You must have heaps of friends."

"I have a great many city and business friends," Matthew acknowledged. "When I leave the city, I like to forget them. Although I am a hard-working man, in my way I love pleasure. I like the best restaurants, good dinners, wine, and, if one is lucky enough to be able to get it, the companionship of some one as beautiful as you, Rosina."

She laughed a little uneasily.

"It isn't like you to pay compliments, Matthew," she declared.

"I have often felt disposed to say such things to you," he told her. "It is you yourself who sometimes make it difficult."

"It was rather unkind of your wife to write to Madame," she remarked irrelevantly.

Matthew frowned.

"I was going to speak of that," he said. "If Madame sent you away, I think I ought to make you some compensation. I should like to talk to you seriously on the matter, Rosina."

"There is no need to," she assured him. "It did make things a little awkward for me, and Madame practically dismissed me, but Mr. Vaculos — he is a partner — got her to change her mind. I am only allowed in the show-

room now at times, though, and never when there is any chance of your wife calling."

"You're still with Mathilde, then?"

"My dear Matthew," she laughed, "look at me! You think, perhaps, that this gown I am wearing is simple. It would cost you sixty guineas as it is, and forty guineas to have copied."

"Is it your own, then?" he asked, puzzled.

"Don't be an idiot," she replied. "My salary is four pounds ten a week, and I have to live out of it, besides buy clothes. Madame lends a few of us models to wear, so long as we come to these places. There are often lady journalists and people about. I am in a Mathilde frock. It is the only way a real artist in clothes can advertise."

"Then those clothes you wore at luncheon the other day?"

"Mathilde's — even the silk stockings, which had to be dyed a special colour. I hope you noticed them. Madame is very gracious to me when I lunch or dine with that particular young man. He has brought all his sisters to the place."

Matthew was vaguely disappointed. He had to reconstruct his ideas.

"Isn't it rather a precarious sort of existence for you?" he asked. "No one particular to fall back upon, and no chance of saving anything?"

She laughed.

"My dear Matthew," she replied, "I wasn't made like you — always building up for the future. Some day or other, and before very long, too, I am going to marry Philip. Until then, I shall struggle along, somehow or other. I am beginning to have faith in my star. I've wriggled out of some terrible messes."

"You hear from Philip, then?" he enquired gloomily.

"Every week," she answered. "He has had a hard

fight, but he has had one or two things published over there — things he is proud of, things I have been proud to read. It's difficult work at first — there seems to be so much larger a market for inferior stuff — but he isn't likely to make another mistake. His novel is finished now, and his play is nearly ready. In the long run I am sure he will succeed. Directly there is a definite sign of it, I shall go out to him or he will come home to me."

Matthew sipped his champagne. Then he leaned across the table. He had the air of a man who has arrived at a long-sought-for decision.

"Rosina," he said, "do you know that I am very fond of you?"

"I hope you are," she answered. "I think that you must be or you would not trouble to ask me out."

"I am very fond of you indeed," Matthew repeated, "and I am sometimes very lonely. There is no one I like to be with so much. Couldn't I see a little more of you, Rosina?"

She looked at him across the little cluster of pink roses. This was rather an unfamiliar Matthew. For a moment she prayed for Violet's callousness.

"I am afraid not — not very much more, Matthew," she replied. "You see, although we are such old friends, there is your wife — and she will be home soon. I should hate to go out with you secretly, and I should hate still more for Madame to have another letter and for me to lose my place."

He cleared his throat, which had somehow become a little dry.

"I should like," he declared, "to make you independent of Madame."

With the crisis, her courage seemed to rise.

"You could not do that, Matthew," she assured him.

"Why not?" he demanded. "I am rich, Rosina. I am becoming richer every day. You do not understand the power of wealth — you never have done. I can buy you those frocks you wear on sufferance, I can buy you the pearls you ought to be wearing around your neck, I can — "

There was a singular, almost dramatic pause in Matthew's speech. A single word, spoken at an adjoining table, seemed to have arrested the full flow of his eloquence. He sat with his mouth still a little open, his whole being concentrated in an effort of listening. For Rosina, hoping against hope, her weapons of wilful misunderstanding momentarily blunted, the interlude came as a blessed relief. From thoughts of herself, however, she passed immediately to concern for her companion. His tense expression was entirely unnatural.

"What is the matter, Matthew?" she enquired. "Are you feeling ill?"

He summoned a waiter.

"Send for an evening paper for me," he directed,— "quickly! Let me have it in less than a minute."

The man called for a page boy, who departed hastily. Matthew turned back to his companion.

"Let me see, where was I?" he asked, a trifle unsteadily.

"Never mind about that," she begged. "You were being just a little silly. Tell me what was the matter with you just then?"

"Those fools at the next table," he explained, dropping his voice, "they spoke of a rumour — an impossible rumour — which would affect me financially. It gave me a shock for a moment. — What was I going to say? — Oh, I know! That young man you were lunching with, the other day. Is he — "

"Well?"

"Is he in love with you?"

"Not the least bit in the world," she declared. "He is just nice, that's all, and he knows I'm lonely. He has an appointment now in Paris at the Embassy — second secretary — so I don't see much of him."

"He's a queer stick if he can take you about and not be in love with you," Matthew observed. "I don't think I could."

Rosina leaned back in her place and laughed.

"My dear Matthew!" she expostulated. "Fancy your being in love with anybody!"

The boy stood by his side with a paper. Matthew snatched at it. The strange look came back to his eyes. Rosina, turning away from him to glance around the room, was aware of a little murmur of excitement. People were consulting their watches, some parties were breaking up and making an early departure. Suddenly Rosina heard the paper crumpled up in Matthew's hand.

"Do you know what has happened?" he exclaimed, in a harsh, unnatural tone. "There's been some rank treason somewhere, either in the Cabinet or amongst the Labour leaders. There's a railway and transport strike from to-night. After midnight, there won't be a train running in Great Britain. Curse these Trades Union men! You can't trust them a yard. If I were the Government, I'd pack the lot in prison!"

Rosina was a little dazed. There seemed to her no great tragedy in what had happened.

"Why are all the people leaving?" she asked, looking around.

"People who live in the suburbs are anxious to get home," he answered. "The trains may be taken off at any moment. There'll be a run on taxicabs, too."

"Ought we to go?" she asked.

Matthew hesitated.

"I had meant to dance with you downstairs," he said, "and I haven't finished — what I wanted to say. That will all have to stand over for a time, though. This strike will mean a period of great anxiety for me. If you don't mind, Rosina, I will drive you home. I have the car waiting. I must go to the club and see if there is any later news."

Rosina decided in future to believe in Providence. She concealed her relief, however, and was duly sympathetic. On the way home, she made one effort with a view to the future.

"Matthew dear," she said, patting his hand, "I want to thank you immensely for bringing me out. I've loved the evening. I'm afraid I'm terribly fond of pleasure and good dinners. I hope all your troubles will pass and that you will take me out again. But — "

"Well, go on," he invited, as she hesitated.

"I didn't like very much the way you were talking, Matthew, just before we heard about the strike. I don't understand you. I had a horrible feeling that I didn't want to. I believe, in my heart, that I am just silly — that you are only teasing me. But I don't want to be teased that way."

He looked at her gloomily, half suspicious, half angry.

"What do you expect me to believe?" he muttered. "You're not so amazingly different from every other young woman in the world. At Norchester we were children. Up here we've both learnt our lesson. It's no good trying to live like one of the babes in the wood. You've had adventures, flirtations — you must have had them."

"I don't think I'm in the least like one of the babes in the wood, Matthew," she protested gently. "I don't

pretend not to understand a great many things I knew nothing about at Norchester. I don't pretend that in many ways I am not disappointed. Life seemed such a fairy story — and it isn't. But apart from that, Matthew, I am not so very much changed, and I never shall be. I love beautiful things, just as I did in Norchester, when we used to escape from a week of ugliness and lie under the pine trees, and feel the sunshine, and listen to the wind in the corn, and hear the larks singing overhead. And I hate ugly things. In Norchester I used to think that the ugliest things in the world were the house we lived in, the chapel we were driven to, the factory we worked in, the rough crowds in the streets. There is another sort of ugliness, worse than any of this, more terrifying. I've found out about that, too, Matthew, but, after all, it doesn't come near us — unless we go out of our way to draw it into our lives."

The car stopped. Matthew handed her out.

"Can't I come up for a few minutes?" he begged.

She shook her head.

"Followers not allowed," she laughed. "We're friends, Matthew, aren't we?" she added, holding out her hand. "And you understand?"

"I understand that you're an unpractical visionary," he declared vigorously. "You can't live in the world you're living in and keep on telling yourself it's Utopia. — I'm not myself to-night, though. I can't argue. But there's this difference between us. I love the world I see around me, and I want to live in it to the fullest extent. You seem to blunder your way along — to build fancies of an impossible Paradise which never existed and never could exist, and flatter yourself that some one will let down a silken ladder out of heaven for you to climb up and take your place there. It may do for you. I like the pleasures I can see and feel."

She turned away with a little wave of the hand. It was with a sense of relief that she felt the pavement beneath her feet.

"We'll compare notes — later on," she suggested.

CHAPTER IX

Matthew, face to face with unexpected disaster, showed signs of collapse. For the first week or so after the declaration of the strike, he had been as bumptious and imperturbable as ever. The strain, however, was beginning to tell. The fall in Home Rails had been phenomenal. The meeting of his last settlement had absorbed every penny Matthew possessed in the world. The fateful day had once more arrived. The account was in the inner pocket of his coat, a hideous document. Late that afternoon, for the first time, his stockbrokers had disobeyed instructions and sent him an urgent note to his office. The note was curt, almost peremptory — "unless the debit balance of twenty-eight thousand nine hundred pounds were paid before eleven o'clock the following morning, the whole block of shares would be thrown upon the market." The result would be nothing short of utter and complete ruin.

He had left the office at the usual hour and made his way home purely out of habit. His wife was still on the Riviera, and on the whole he was thankful for her absence. Any appeal to her he knew would be as hopeless as to his partners. They both of them had a horror of speculation in any shape or form. He even remembered tardily that he was prohibited, in the articles of partnership, from all dealings upon the Stock Exchange save for purposes of investment. He sat in his elaborately furnished study for an hour after his return from the city, biting his finger nails and trying to think of some way out of his difficulty. In the end he took up the tele-

phone directory, found out his stockbroker's private address, rang him up, was referred to his club, and, sending for a taxi, drove round there. He waited in the hall for some five minutes, whilst his name was taken in. When the stockbroker at last appeared, he received his client with only superficial cordiality.

"I called to see you in the city twice to-day," Matthew announced, as they shook hands. "They said you were out, both times."

Mr. Morgan nodded.

"I was in the House myself for some time. Wretched day altogether. You know, we're pretty well up against a panic. Unless the Government steps in, there'll be some very serious news from the city within the next few weeks. Sorry you're having such a bad time, Mr. Garner. You're not so much to be pitied, though, as the weaker men who can't see it through."

Matthew bluffed for all he was worth, stood on the soles of his feet and did his best to reëstablish his self-confidence.

"Look here, Morgan," he said, "I'm not one of the weaker men, as you know, but it would be a very great convenience to me if you could do something about my settlement to-morrow."

The stockbroker was horrified.

"My dear Mr. Garner," he protested, "for heaven's sake, don't talk like that! Every penny the firm possesses is being used. We've pushed our bankers to the uttermost limit. If it were to save one of our most favoured clients from bankruptcy, we couldn't find a half, or even a quarter of your settlement."

"It will mean a heavy loss to me," Matthew declared. "I shall have to sell stocks which I never intended to put on the market at all."

"But we're all losing money every day," Mr. Morgan

insisted, a little impatiently. "You mustn't mind that. You've made money, now and then. You must lose with the rest sometimes. You'll make it up some day. Have a drink, won't you, and then I must run away."

Matthew accepted a whisky and soda in order to gain time.

"I'm not squealing about losing a bit," he said, "but you must remember that this settlement will bring my losses up to pretty well fifty thousand pounds."

The stockbroker shrugged his shoulders.

"You took a risk," he reminded his client. "You were quite certain there was going to be no strike. If there hadn't been one, you'd have netted thirty or forty thousand pounds by now."

Matthew half closed his eyes. The thought was agony.

"I felt sure that I could trust my information," he said. "It came from an inside source. However, that's neither here nor there. I want you to do me a favour, Mr. Morgan. I've never asked as much yet from any man breathing. I want that settlement carried over."

"It absolutely cannot be done," was the uncompromising reply. "It isn't a question of lack of confidence, or anything of that sort. It simply is that we haven't the money. We're not a poor firm, but every penny of our capital is being used up to the hilt."

Matthew was silent for a moment. The stockbroker finished his whisky and soda and glanced at the clock.

"Sorry to hurry you," he said, "but I have an early dinner this evening."

"You can't help me at all, then?" Matthew persisted, doggedly.

"I can't. There's only one thing to be said. You spoke of having to realise some shares at a loss. If they are really gilt-edged, and there is sufficient margin, I might stretch a point and get the money advanced upon

them. I know the bank would make a great favour of it, but I'd like to do anything I could to oblige a client."

Matthew looked out of the windows of the club and down St. James's Street. There was nothing in his face to indicate the nature of his thoughts. The stockbroker's suggestion had brought to a definite issue a certain half-formed idea which had haunted him for the last hour. He seemed to be looking into another world, to have lost his own identity, to be gazing in upon another man's anguish.

"The shares are gilt-edged," he said, moistening his lips.

"What are they?" the stockbroker enquired.

"Government bonds, some of them, and shares in my own firm."

Mr. Morgan nodded.

"I'll get you an advance of five-eighths of anything you can bring of that description," he promised. "I'd rather you'd done it through your own bank, though."

Matthew shook his head.

"I'd rather do it through you," he declared bluntly. "Anyhow, I'll think it over."

The stockbroker rose to his feet with alacrity.

"Don't forget," he begged, "that you have only till the opening of the House to-morrow. I never doubted but that your cheque was in the post."

Matthew stood gloomily looking out of the window for a moment.

"Well," he concluded, "I suppose the situation must be faced. I'll either send you round my cheque or bring you the shares, before eleven."

"Good man! I am sorry to seem disobliging, but we're going through hell in the city."

Matthew walked slowly back to Belgrave Square. Arrived there, he changed deliberately for dinner, ate his

meal alone and in solemn silence. Afterwards, he left word that if he were wanted he would be at his club, and, taking his hat and coat, left the house. At the corner of the Square, he took a taxi to the city and alighted near the Mansion House. From there he walked through the now deserted streets to the imposing premises of Messrs. Faringdon, Nettleby, Ford and Company. He let himself in with his latchkey. A flood of electric light immediately blazed out. Benjamin Stone rose from his chair.

"Glad to find you're on the alert, Stone," Matthew said patronisingly. "Everybody gone, I suppose?"

"Some hours ago," was the surprised reply.

"I want some papers I left in Mr. Faringdon's room," Matthew explained. "Whilst I'm here, I may write a few letters. You needn't be disturbed if you hear me moving about."

The night watchman resumed his seat and Matthew passed on. He made his way to Mr. Faringdon's private office, closed the door and turned on the light. For a moment or two he sat listening. Assured that Benjamin Stone was not moving about, he selected a key from his bunch and opened his partner's desk. It was a key which he had had made for other reasons, and which he had already used more than once when in search of information. This time he was in search of something more definite. Within five minutes he had found what he sought — a bunch of keys on which was that of the firm's strong room. He locked up the desk and once more listened. There was a queer silence in the streets outside and in the great building. Assured that no one was stirring, Matthew turned out the light and made his way slowly back along the corridor to his own office. He remained there for several moments, deep in thought.

Then he went back to where Benjamin Stone was seated.

"Stone," he said, "I must have an evening paper with a list of the mails in. You'll find a boy somewhere between here and Moorgate Street. I'll look after the place."

Benjamin Stone rose slowly to his feet and took his hat down from a nail behind.

"It is against my express orders to leave the warehouse at any time whilst on duty," he declared coldly. "You are willing, I have no doubt, to take that responsibility?"

"Naturally," Matthew replied. "Close the door behind you. I shall be in my office, close at hand."

Benjamin Stone did as he was bidden. Matthew waited until he heard the closing of the door and the departing footsteps on the paved courtyard. Then he made his way to the strong room, a floor lower down. He was some time before he found the correct key on Mr. Faringdon's bunch. He opened the door at last, however. Around the wall were neatly fitting iron receptacles, each one labelled. There were specifications of patents applied for and granted, formulæ in connection with the dyeing branch of their business, the charters of their Asiatic company,— many documents of interest and importance which seemed to have been left undisturbed for years. Each receptacle had a black number painted upon it. At Number 15, which was somewhat larger than the rest, Matthew paused. The card in the little slot bore the single word — Securities. Matthew's fingers were hot as he searched for the key. He found it at last. The compartment slid open almost of its own accord. His eyes glittered as he bent over the neatly arranged rows of packets, all tied up, sealed and labelled. There were shares in many subsidiary companies, mostly in foreign countries, which he put back after a glance at them; a thin packet, labelled:

GOVERNMENT BONDS
THE PROPERTY OF MR. GEORGE NETTLEBY

which he slipped at once into his pocket. Continuing his search, he came presently to an oblong packet, labelled:

SHARE CERTIFICATES IN
FARINGDON, NETTLEBY, FORD & CO.
Nos. 80-180.
THE PROPERTY OF MR. ARTHUR FARINGDON

And finally, another and thicker packet of Government bonds, labelled with their cost price — £15,000 — and also inscribed with the name of Mr. Arthur Faringdon. Matthew paused to make a rapid calculation. The shares of the firm stood at 120, even at this time of terrible depression. If he reckoned them at par, there were ten thousand pounds' worth of these, in hundred-pound shares. The two lots of Government bonds together came to thirty thousand pounds. It was enough for his purpose. He transferred the three packets to his pocket and carefully rearranged the documents which he had disturbed. As soon as he had them all in order, he closed the compartment. Then he drew a little breath, surprised to find himself trembling in every limb. A horrible fear seemed suddenly to be paralysing him. He had heard no footsteps, nor any sound, yet he knew that he was not alone. He tried to look around. Almost at the same moment, Benjamin Stone's harsh voice broke the terrible stillness.

"Take your hands out of your pockets. Hold them up — quick!"

He obeyed, shivering, a conscience-stricken coward.

Benjamin Stone, stern and pale, was standing upon the threshold — Benjamin the preacher and the man of peace — with a most murderous-looking automatic pistol held in fingers as motionless as a vice.

CHAPTER X

"MATTHEW! My God, it's Matthew!"

Matthew, in those first few seconds, was utterly unable to rise to the situation. Even although the identity of the intruder was in some respects a relief to him, he was still the craven. He realised afterwards the great opportunity he had missed. With courage and composure, his presence in the strong room of the firm might easily have been explained. As it was, he shrank back, a self-convicted felon. Benjamin Stone's pistol was slowly lowered.

"I had no idea that it was you in here," he said, in a strained, unnatural tone. "I thought some thief must have lain concealed in the premises. Hadn't you better put back those bonds?"

"I cannot," Matthew found strength to reply. "I need the use of them for a day or two. Come up to my office and I will explain."

"Whatever explanations you may attempt to offer," Benjamin Stone assured him, "you will not leave these premises with those bonds. Better put them back now and save time."

"I'm only borrowing them," Matthew declared. "They will be back here in less than a fortnight."

"They will be back in less time than that," was the grim reply. "Give me the keys of this room."

Matthew was as yet without powers of resistance. He produced them without a word, the room was locked up, and, obeying the other's almost fierce gesture, he led the way to his office.

"Hand me those packets," Benjamin Stone ordered, as soon as they had arrived at their destination.

Matthew did as he was told and threw himself into his chair sullenly.

"Look here," he muttered, "remember I got you this job. I've a perfect right to enter my own strong room. I'm one of the partners of the firm."

Benjamin Stone gathered the three packets into his hand. He took a seat opposite his late ward and leaned forward in his place.

"Matthew Garner," he said, "there are a few things which Mr. Faringdon himself told me when I took up my position here. One was that no living person save himself and Mr. Nettleby had the right to enter the strong room. The keys are kept locked up in the desk in his private office. You have no right in that office, nor have you any right to a key to Mr. Faringdon's desk. You entered the strong room as a thief. You cannot contradict it. It is there, written in your face. What does it mean?"

"It means just this," Matthew replied. "I have lost money on the Stock Exchange. I need thirty thousand pounds to-morrow. I have tried every way to raise it and failed. I intended to borrow those bonds for a week or two, until things mended. My stockbroker had agreed to lend the money upon them, and everything would have been all right but for your damnable interference."

"To borrow them!" Benjamin Stone repeated bitterly. "Was there ever a thief who didn't call it borrowing!"

"I wish to God I'd never found you this job!" Matthew exclaimed. "You're such an old Psalm-singer, I suppose there's no getting round you? What'll you hand those bonds over for and hold your tongue? A thousand pounds?"

Benjamin Stone seemed suddenly to have become curiously inattentive. His mind had wandered back to an-

other few moments of agony — another empty building, stealthy footsteps in the distance, the slamming of a door. He suddenly leaned across the table.

"Matthew Garner, answer me truthfully, if you hope for any mercy in this world. There were fifty pounds missing from my cash box the Sunday night before you left Norchester."

"I took it," Matthew announced coolly. "I considered I had a right to it. You underpaid me all the time I worked for you, and, when we left, you gave fifty pounds to Philip and fifty to Rosina, and to me only the legacy which was my due. I had a key to the factory and I went down and helped myself."

There was mingled relief and horror in Benjamin's face.

"And I thought it was Philip!" he muttered. "I thought it was Philip and that perhaps Rosina knew! He was branded in my thoughts as a thief. My heart was as a stone towards them. — God forgive me!"

Benjamin Stone was shaken. Opposite him, Matthew sat wondering whether a sudden attack might not give him possession of the bonds. Then he remembered. There would be the morrow. Nothing short of murder would seal the man's lips.

"It was Philip's fault that I was able to steal the money," he declared. "He went away on the Saturday and left the cash box open on the office table. In any case, how could you have helped them? You haven't much left, I should think, out of your three pounds a week."

Benjamin Stone was thoughtful for a few moments. Then he rose to his feet.

"Come with me and replace those bonds," he directed. "Afterwards, I have something to say to you of importance."

"Listen to reason," Matthew began,—

"I will listen to no word from you till the bonds are replaced," Benjamin Stone interrupted sternly. "When that is done, I will speak of your troubles."

Matthew rose reluctantly, and together they passed along the corridor, down a flight of stairs, into the strong room. Silently, the younger man opened the compartment and replaced the packets. Then they retraced their steps. When they had regained his office, Matthew was livid with mingled anger and fear.

"This means my ruin," he groaned.

"Sit down and tell me how you got into this trouble?" Benjamin Stone demanded.

"I needed money to equalise my position with the other members of the firm," Matthew explained. "I have been operating successfully on the Stock Exchange ever since I was made a partner. Just before the strike, I made my first mistake. I bought Home Rails when they looked low. A Cabinet Minister had assured me that there would be no strike."

"You gambled, lost, and were willing to become a thief!" Benjamin Stone pointed out. "Now listen to me. Exactly what sum is it you require to-morrow?"

"Twenty-eight thousand, nine hundred pounds."

"Give me the name of your stockbrokers and I will settle with them."

Matthew gazed across the table, open-mouthed.

"Don't talk nonsense!" he exclaimed roughly. "You are a ruined man and you know it. You couldn't raise twenty-eight thousand, nine hundred pounds to save your life."

"You are ill-informed," Benjamin Stone observed coldly. "The sum you mention shall be paid, and I will undertake to carry your stocks through until the strike is over."

His tone and manner were alike convincing. Yet it

was hard for Matthew to grasp the truth. He sat in his place, still open-mouthed and incredulous.

"You are one of those men, Matthew," his late guardian continued, "who are naturally shrewd but idiotically egotistical. You rely on your own judgments and you jump to conclusions. You considered me a fool because I refused to put in new machinery at my factory. The reason I did not put it in was because the premises were old and inadequate, and because the three other principal factories in Norchester, all equipped in the most modern fashion, belonged to me. It is untrue that I have met with any financial misfortunes. I have never spoken to any living person of my wealth, but I am — wealthy."

"Then what the devil are you doing here at three pounds a week?" Matthew asked, in a dazed fashion.

"I will tell you," the other explained. "It is, in a sense, my penance. I was responsible for the life and the upbringing of you three young people. However good my intentions may have been as a guardian, I was a failure. Philip has become a drunkard and an exile. Of Rosina I do not dare to think, but if she has saved herself, it has been without any help from me. You, without heart or conscience, seemed on the road to material prosperity, but even you have broken down. When I realised my failure, I determined to do penance for it. I, too, started life again, earning what I could. I sometimes thought you might have done a little better for me than three pounds a week. Fate, at any rate, has given me a good chance of earning my money."

Matthew wiped the perspiration from his forehead. He was beginning to feel himself again. It was amazing but fortuitous. He was going to be saved from ruin — saved from walking day by day in the shadow of disgrace.

"I was had, then, when I bought your factory!" he

gasped. "You knew all the time that you had the trade in your hands?"

"Precisely!"

Matthew stared across the table. There was a look of reluctant admiration in his eyes.

"Well," he exclaimed, "I never dreamed that any one could fool me so completely at a bargain!"

"The man who thinks only of himself and who indulges in underhand means is often the loser in any sort of a transaction," Benjamin Stone declared. "To attempt to make use of my confidential clerk, to buy his soul and conscience for a paltry fifty pounds, was like you, Matthew. It was a very foolish action."

"Why was it?" Matthew demanded. "You kept the fellow half starved, down under your thumb, for thirty years. He ought to have been fair game for anything of the sort."

Benjamin Stone smiled — a quaint, mirthless smile, but with infinite depths of contempt.

"You gained your imagined knowledge," he said, "through prying into my wages book. To show to what foolish conclusions your methods may lead you, I will tell you this. At the end of his tenth year of service, I gave Mulholland two hundred and fifty pounds. At the end of his twentieth year, I gave him a thousand pounds. At the end of his thirtieth year, I gave him two thousand, five hundred pounds. Mulholland is a saving man and has invested carefully. According to his lights, he is well off."

Matthew fought stubbornly against his humiliation.

"You treated your employés better than your wards," he muttered.

"I treated my wards as I myself was treated when I was young, without taking into account the variation in dispositions. There I was wrong. It is for that reason

I do penance. You alone I understood and treated as I meant to. If you had been a fair man, with Christian principles, I should have brought you up to be my partner. I knew you to be untrustworthy, so I kept you where you belonged. For any imagined wrong I did you, remember that to-night I have saved you from felony, and that to-morrow I propose to save you from ruin."

Matthew wiped his forehead. He was speechless. Benjamin Stone rose slowly to his feet.

"Now let me remind you," he concluded, "that I am night watchman here. It is time you left the premises."

Matthew, too, rose to his feet, put on his hat and coat, and made his way, followed by his companion, to the outside door. Arrived there, he hesitated for a moment.

"I have been in great distress for several days," he said. "My brain is not quite so clear as it was. There's no mistake about any of this, is there? I've given you my settlement paper. You're going to see Morgan to-morrow morning? They expect payment by eleven o'clock."

"They will be satisfied," Benjamin Stone assured him sternly. "You need have no fear, Matthew. What I have promised, I shall perform. I have not even, as you may have remarked, preached to you. You are, in my opinion, a man without moral or religious sense. It was for you and your like, perhaps, that the most cynical of our proverbs was framed. Keep it in the foreground of your mind — '*Honesty is the best policy.*' In plain words — honesty pays best."

Matthew walked out into the silent street, a little dizzy, scarcely yet realising his good fortune. Benjamin Stone went back to his porter's seat and sat there for the rest

of the night with folded arms and knitted brows. Nothing else in the events of the last hour troubled him for a moment beside the one amazing fact — Philip was innocent!

CHAPTER XI

Rosina experienced a distinctly disagreeable shock when, after having gone through the usual preliminaries, she carried her own suit case on to the platform at Victoria and found herself confronted with Mr. Vaculos, whom she had not seen for several months. He appeared to recognise her with some difficulty, and he glanced at the bag which she was carrying in an irritated manner.

"What on earth are you doing with that thing?" he demanded, making, however, no attempt to relieve her of it. "Surely there are plenty of porters?"

"It is quite light," Rosina declared. "I prefer to carry it myself."

"I scarcely see why," he protested. "Your expenses are paid for the trip, and I do not think that Madame would care to see her assistants doing anything so undignified as carrying their own luggage. Is that all you have?"

"Everything," she replied. "Madame told me that I should not require any evening dresses. If she takes me out at all, it will be to note the effect of what she is offered there."

Vaculos shrugged his shoulders and pointed to the guard, who was standing with a carriage door open.

"There is a place for you in there. I hope you don't mind a 'Ladies Only.' From what I remember of you," he added, with a faint smile, "I think it should appeal."

"Aren't you a little disagreeable?" she asked sweetly. "I don't think South America has agreed with you."

"I am in a bad temper," he admitted. "Madame has

been losing money whilst I have been away. I am quite sure that she has been pushing the wrong styles. I intend this trip to Paris to be a very important one. I wished her to bring two or three of you. Where is Miss Shaw? "

"I left her just starting out as usual," Rosina replied. "I am quite sure that Madame never said anything about bringing her, or she would have been delighted. She is engaged to marry Monsieur Victor, who lives in Paris. By the by," she added, "have you seen Madame? I waited for her outside for half an hour."

"I think I saw her stepping into the Pullman," Vaculos replied. "Our seats are in there. I shall probably see you upon the boat."

He turned away and Rosina took her place. Already she had recovered from her little shock of apprehension at finding him there. It was obvious that his penchant for her had departed. She settled down to enjoy the journey, every detail of which was novel and interesting.

At Folkestone, in deference to Vaculos's wishes, she allowed a porter to carry her bag on to the steamer and a steward to procure a chair for her. It was a pleasant, sunny day, but with rather a heavy sea running, and it did not surprise Rosina that she saw nothing of either Vaculos or Madame on deck. She thoroughly enjoyed the crossing, however, her first view of the French coast, and her landing. She followed a little crowd into the Customs House, and afterwards walked up and down, looking into the windows of the French train, with a sense of complete content. The very smell of the engine, the mixed odours of the harbour, the old lady with the dolls, the bareheaded Frenchwoman, with glossy black hair, who sold the newspapers, were all delights to her. Presently, however, the absence of both Vaculos and Madame began to cause her some anxiety. She looked in at the windows of the train, which was rapidly filling. Time passed on.

A Cook's interpreter, to whom she appealed, told her that the train was due to start in five minutes. She was on the point of climbing in and taking any vacant place, when Vaculos came strolling down the platform, smoking a cigarette. For the first time in her life, she was pleased to see him.

"I couldn't find any one!" she exclaimed. "The train is just going to start."

"Plenty of time," he replied. "Here we are."

She followed him on to the train and he led the way to an empty carriage.

"Had anything to eat since you left London?" he asked casually.

She shook her head.

"I was afraid of missing you," she confessed. "I haven't even seen Madame."

Vaculos was busy talking to a boy through the open window. Presently he handed her a cardboard box, in which was a large, delicious chicken sandwich and a half bottle of white wine. The horn sounded, the train began to move. Rosina, who had already commenced to eat her sandwich, suddenly started.

"But where is Madame?" she demanded.

Her companion looked across at her for a moment in faint surprise.

"I forgot I hadn't seen you on the boat," he remarked. "I had a message brought to me just as the train was leaving Victoria. Madame came on by the early train this morning."

Rosina forgot all about her sandwich. She stared across at Vaculos, who had drawn a novel from his bag and was settling down in his corner.

"Gone by the earlier train?" she exclaimed. "Why, I saw her last night. She didn't say a word about it. Why couldn't I have gone with her?"

Vaculos looked over the top of his book.

"There is no accounting for Madame lately," he replied, a little irritably. "Personally, I feel quite sure that I know why she has gone on like this. She wishes to see first the manager of Felix, from whom we buy most of our models, prepare him for my coming, and arrange with him to let her down lightly over her bad purchases. It was very silly of her. I shall get to know all I want from Felix."

He continued reading his novel. Somehow or other, his indifference became communicated to Rosina. She finished her sandwich with appetite, drank a little of the wine, and leaned back in her corner composedly, watching the scenery with immense interest. She had even no sense of uneasiness at being alone with Vaculos. It was a corridor carriage, with people passing all the time, and her companion himself showed not the slightest interest in her presence. Time sped on, with scarcely a word between the two. The first call to dinner passed unnoticed. About an hour afterwards, however, Vaculos glanced at his watch.

"If you wish to arrange your hair or wash," he suggested, "you will find a toilette room just behind. We shall be going in to dinner in ten minutes."

"Dinner?" Rosina exclaimed, springing to her feet. "Do we have it on the train? What fun!"

"That depends upon the point of view," he remarked, a little drily. "When you have arrived at my age, and understand the importance of dining, you will probably regret the fact that the train does not get you into Paris a couple of hours earlier. However, I suppose we must make the best of it."

The best of it, Rosina thought, was very good indeed, when she found herself seated, a few minutes later, at a small table in the dining car. The slight differences of

service, manners and food all delighted her. Everything tasted delicious. She even found herself sipping champagne without being aware of the fact. Her companion had become more polite, but his manner inspired her with no anxiety whatever. He talked amusingly of his experiences in Buenos Ayres and New York. He had met Douglas Erwen, and, to her delight, had even heard of Philip.

"I read a story of your young man's in one of the best American magazines," he announced. "It wasn't at all bad. Erwen told me that he has written really a clever novel, and that he will be coming over to England before long."

Rosina beamed with joy.

"I can't tell you how happy Philip's success out there has made me," she confided. "He was a great anxiety in London. We were both of us miserably poor, and Philip was in the hands of that wretched little editor, who made him drink and do poor work. It was Mr. Erwen who took him right away and gave him a fresh start."

"Wonderfully unselfish of him, under the circumstances," Vaculos remarked quietly.

It was the first disturbing note. Rosina flushed a little.

"Mr. Erwen has been a dear and generous friend to me," she said. "I told him about Philip and he understood."

"As a purely academic question," her companion asked thoughtfully, "doesn't such intense fidelity impose rather severe restrictions upon your life?"

"Why should it?" she exclaimed. "I am not a slave to my fidelity. I go to the theatre with any one when I am asked, and lunch or dine out, if any one is good enough to want me to."

"Lunching and dining and the theatre are well enough

in their way," Vaculos observed, "but they are only trifles."

"For anything except the trifles," Rosina rejoined, "I am perfectly content to wait. Every girl is, who cares."

He sighed.

"It is a patience," he observed, "which is a remarkable characteristic of your sex — a characteristic, I am afraid, unshared even by the most conscientious of ours."

"Are you suggesting," she asked, smiling across at him, "that Philip is making love to some other girl?"

"From what I have heard of the young man," Vaculos replied, "I imagine him to be a person with ordinary human instincts. However, this shows signs of becoming an unprofitable discussion. We will leave Mr. Philip Garth out of the question. You shall tell me whether you are looking forward with pleasure to your visit to Paris?"

"To see Paris itself will be wonderful," Rosina declared. "I don't expect much in the way of amusements. Madame will naturally be busy with her friends. I shall be content just to be there."

Vaculos filled her glass and his own and replaced the bottle in the rack.

"I have a psychological interest," he said, "in a girl's first visit to Paris. You are so prompt to misunderstand that I should fear to make the suggestion to you. I have always thought that it would be delightful to take a young woman with your appreciation of life, and your ignorance, to a charming hotel, say in the Bois, and to become a sort of fantastic godfather — her escort but her shadow; to take her to the shops — they are very wonderful shops, I can assure you — and have her select the clothes she liked best; to the furriers, and see her walk away in Russian sables for the daytime, and with a chinchilla coat for evenings. Then I would give her

luncheon at one of those amazing restaurants in the Bois — the Pré Catelan or the Armenonville — where the smartest of the *beau monde* are to be seen — where she could look at the wonderful women of the world and be herself looked at. Afterwards, we would leave in our waiting automobile for Auteuil, and watch the jumping and see more wonderful frocks. Tea, perhaps, at one of the fashionable hotels, and a long rest before dinner, with a perfect maid to see that the bath was the right temperature and the bath salts not sprinkled in too lavishly. Then, the perfect toilette, dinner at one of the great restaurants, where one may watch the men and women best worth watching in the great world; a box at the theatre; supper afterwards to the music of violins; a round of the gay cafés, with a dance here and there; a song, perhaps, from a great artiste of the Opera House, happy in her hours of pleasure — a dance from the première danseuse of the ballet, giving from sheer lightheartedness what thousands have paid their thirty francs to see. And so home, with all the rest and beauty of wonderful apartments waiting."

"You take one's breath away!" Rosina exclaimed, with glowing eyes. "You make it sound too wonderful."

"It could all come true," Vaculos said, with a little sigh, "it could all become reality to-morrow — if I could find the companion I desired."

"To remain their fairy godfather?" she challenged, perhaps a little unwisely.

He smiled, and the light which flashed for a moment in those pale eyes warned her of her mistake.

"That would depend," he said. "One has one's dreams. One follows them sometimes to the gates of disappointment."

Her old uneasiness in the man's presence was back again. Rosina felt herself shivering. The unusualness

of the situation was suddenly large in her thoughts. Vaculos, watching her intently, saw the change. He was not altogether dissatisfied, however. Her delight at his graphic little picture had given him heart.

"Life would be a dull place but for these wanderings into Fancy Land," he declared. "I shall probably never find the companion to whom I should care to devote myself, my thousands will remain in the bank, and I shall fritter away my evenings with small pleasures. You, on the other hand, will never realise the subtle and everlasting joy of having been, even for a few weeks, the princess of the most wonderful city in the world. You will sacrifice the marvel of those few weeks to a certain piquant but disastrous narrowness of outlook. I, too, must remain with my feet upon the earth because I am cursed with the selective instinct, and what I would do for one, I would do for no other in the world."

The electric fans were hard at work, but there was steam upon the carriage windows and Rosina was suddenly conscious of the heat. She rose a little abruptly from her place.

"Do you mind if I go back to the carriage?" she asked. "It is so insufferably hot here."

Vaculos assented absent-mindedly.

"I will follow you," he said, "when I have finished my cigar."

CHAPTER XII

The train roared on into a gulf of darkness, oscillating now more than ever. Every now and then, myriads of lights flashed out on either side of the way. Paris drew nearer. Rosina sat and gazed out of the window. Her thoughts were in disorder. The sense of excitement within her, which increased with the widening of the lights around, had ceased to be altogether pleasant. She was not exactly afraid — Vaculos had been too clever for that — but a sense of new and unsuspected dangers seemed mingled with her anticipations. She was very human, and it was possible that those wonderful word pictures of her companion's had left a grain or two of their poison in her veins. Vaculos entered, a few minutes later, to find her still absorbed.

"We shall be in Paris in ten minutes," he announced, opening his dressing case and disclosing for a moment its luxurious equipment. "My servant is on the train somewhere. He will see the luggage through the Customs, and drop your bag at the hotel where you are staying, before he brings mine to my rooms."

She was conscious of a sudden sense of relief.

"Will Madame be at the station?" she enquired.

"Extremely improbable," he replied drily. "Madame, if I know anything about her, is at the present moment concluding an elaborate dinner at Henry's or the Café de Paris with Monsieur Felix. She will turn up at your hotel later. Your room is at any rate engaged — I happen to know that."

"Can't you put me in a carriage and let me find my way there?" she asked, with simulated indifference.

"Certainly, if you prefer it," he assented. "My automobile will be waiting, however, and I pass your door. By the by, you must give me your keys. François will need them for the *douanes*."

"I haven't any," she replied. "I have no valuables, and my bag isn't locked."

"That sounds a little pathetic," he remarked. "However —"

One more series of violent oscillations, punctuated by a little succession of jolts, and the train glided in under the great arch of the Gare du Nord. A dark-faced manservant and a chauffeur appeared as though by magic at Vaculos's elbow. He gave a few instructions to both and led Rosina from the station. Outside, a very handsome car was waiting. Vaculos handed his companion in.

"It is a wonderfully warm night," he observed. "I wonder whether you would like to have the car open? The first view of the boulevards at this time of night is rather impressive."

"I should like it very much," Rosina answered, a little nervously. "You are sure, however, that this is not taking you out of your way?"

"Not in the least," he assured her. "My rooms are not a stone's-throw away. Madame has rather a queer taste in hotels," he went on, as he took the place by her side. "She prefers a very small, private one — the Hotel des Beaux Arts, up in the Rue Beaux Arts. No fun for you, I am afraid, for there isn't even a restaurant. She will be certain to take you out to dine one evening before you go back, though."

"It is quite sufficient for me to be here," Rosina declared. "I am sure I am going to find it all wonderful."

They descended into the Place de l'Opéra, where they paused for a moment, Vaculos pointing out the Opera House itself, the Café de la Paix, and other objects of

interest. They crossed the Boulevard des Italiens, the Place Vendôme, and turned into the Champs Elysées. Rosina had forgotten her uneasiness. She was drinking in the wonder and the beauty of it all. Presently they left the Champs Elysées and turned to the right. They were in a neighbourhood here of broad, clean-swept, cobbled streets, with handsome, silent-looking houses. The car came to a standstill before one of these. The second man upon the box touched a bell in the wall, and a courtyard door was opened. Inside was a pleasant vista — a square with a fountain playing in the middle, flowers and a flagged walk all round; opposite, a handsome swing door.

"Is this really an hotel?" Rosina asked wonderingly. "It looks like a palace."

"It is an hotel, right enough," her companion assured her. "If you really mean that you speak no French at all, I had better come in and hand you over to Madame."

"It is very stupid of me," Rosina confessed, "but I can't speak a word."

They skirted one side of the square and passed in through the mahogany swing doors. A *concierge* in gorgeous livery rose from his place and welcomed them with a low bow. On the other side of the marble hall was a lift. A young woman, neatly dressed in black and wearing a cap, came hurrying towards them, smiling. She conversed with Vaculos for some moments in rapid French, finally producing a half-sheet of paper, which she handed to him. He nodded and turned to Rosina.

"Madame, as I expected," he remarked with a smile, "has dined out and gone to the theatre. She has left a message, asking you to meet her at half-past eleven for supper at the Abbaye Restaurant in the Montmartre. I will call for you at a quarter past eleven and take you to her.

"But I have no clothes for anything of that sort!" Rosina exclaimed, in dismay.

Vaculos passed her the half sheet of notepaper. The few lines upon it were in Madame's handwriting — a hasty, pencilled scrawl:

> Ask Mr. Vaculos to bring you to the Abbaye Restaurant, Montmartre, at 11.30. If he is engaged, come alone. I have sent in some clothes for you. Marie will get you anything you want.

"I have an engagement for later on," Vaculos announced indifferently, "but I shall be able to take you up to the restaurant. I see that it is ten o'clock already. You had better let Marie show you to your room."

He raised his hat and turned away. Rosina followed the maid to the lift and ascended to the third storey. They traversed a broad corridor, lit with shaded lights and thickly carpeted. The maid opened with a latchkey a heavy mahogany door. They crossed a little hall and entered a delightful bedroom, decorated in rose pink and white. Through an inner door, Rosina caught sight of a white marble bathroom.

"Is this really my room?" she gasped. "It seems much too wonderful. And where is Madame's?"

The maid smiled and shook her head.

"*Ne comprends pas un mot d'Anglais*," she murmured.

Rosina looked all around her. Upon the bed were spread out a white and gold evening dress, shoes and stockings and a theatre coat. Marie pointed to them and smiled. Then she hurried into the bathroom and turned on the taps. Rosina made a sign of assent, and abandoned herself to the luxury of her surroundings.

At a quarter past eleven there was a knock at an inner

door, which as yet Rosina had not noticed. The maid opened it and stood on one side.

"*C'est monsieur*," she announced.

Rosina passed into the sitting room, where Vaculos was waiting. Again she was surprised at the magnificence of the apartment in which she found herself. The walls were panelled with light satinwood; there were some exquisite pieces of statuary, wonderful etchings and water colours, furniture which, even to her inexperience, was priceless. Vaculos watched her. He seemed paler than ever.

"Mr. Vaculos, what sort of an hotel is this?" she asked, in a troubled tone. "I never saw such a magnificent room in my life. It is more like your own house in London."

He did not immediately answer her. She looked at him, and something in his gaze brought the colour to her cheeks.

"The room is ordinary," he declared. "It is you who are the most beautiful thing that ever breathed."

"You are trying to turn my head," she laughed uneasily. "Let us go. I am very anxious to find Madame."

He opened the door.

"The room is well enough," he observed, glancing around. "This is one of the differences one always notices in Paris. The appointments of the hotels are far more elegant."

They rang for the lift. Rosina looked up and down the dimly lit corridor.

"It is extraordinarily quiet here," she remarked.

Vaculos shrugged his shoulders.

"As I told you before, it is Madame's choice, not mine," he said. "I find the larger, cosmopolitan hotels more amusing."

"I am afraid that it must be terribly expensive," she reflected.

He smoothed the nap of his silk hat softly.

"Madame has extravagant tastes," he murmured.

They passed across the luxurious hall, with its white marble floor and costly rugs. Again the magnificent-looking *concierge* rose and bowed. There was no hotel bureau, no sign of any public room. Rosina drew a little breath of relief as she stepped into the automobile.

"You do not like your quarters?" he asked curiously.

"They seem too magnificent to be real," she acknowledged frankly. "I feel as though I had wandered into some sort of modernised fairyland. I have never had a maid to prepare my bath and dress me before. I have never slept in such a beautiful room. I have never worn such beautiful clothes."

"They become you," he assured her. "You are a little austere in your outlook but you were made for luxury. I should like to think of you living in just those surroundings."

"It would be wonderful," she admitted. "I am afraid my austerity, as you call it, is only superficial. I love the feel of my clothes, the warmth and luxury of those rooms, and I adore riding in this wonderful limousine."

He turned towards her. He lowered his voice a little. It was never an unpleasant voice, and at this moment it was less steady than usual — almost caressing.

"Why not offer yourself as the subject of that experiment I spoke of in the train?" he suggested. "Will you try it for a month — the rooms just as they are; your wardrobe — just what you select; this car or any other you may prefer — and myself, your *cavalier servant?* It would be of no use your trying it without me, because in Paris, more than any other place, you must have an escort wherever you go."

"It would be very wonderful," Rosina laughed, "but what about Cinderella when her reign was over? How should I feel when I got back to Violet and our attic rooms, and wore clothes all day at Madame's for other people to buy?"

"The month," he murmured, "might be extended."

She sighed.

"Then the awakening would be still more terrible," she said. — "How I love these streets! And how happy the people all look!"

"The French people have great gifts," he observed, accepting without protest her deliberate evasion. "They have consciences but they are not slaves to them, principles but they do not sacrifice their life to them. They feel the joy of living and they are not afraid of it. They take the goods the gods send. You will see no wrinkles or thoughtful faces to-night. You will see gaiety, which, after all, is more important than anything else in the world."

They drew up in front of a brilliantly lighted restaurant. Their entrance was after the fashion of a triumphant reception. The *maître d'hôtel* met them almost in the street, the scarlet-coated leader of the orchestra came across the room to greet them, the manager himself hurried up, they were surrounded by servants to relieve Mr. Vaculos of his coat and hat and stick. All the time, compliments were being exchanged in rapid French. Rosina could understand nothing except that her escort was a very valued client.

"Madame is not here!" she exclaimed, in a tone of disappointment.

Vaculos glanced around the room.

"It is quite early yet," he said. "I suppose the theatres are scarcely out."

They were ushered to a table against the wall.

"But this is only for two," Rosina protested, as she sank into the cushioned seat. "What about Madame and her friend?"

"The tables here join," her companion pointed out. "The next table can easily be added to this."

They were surrounded by a little crowd of satellites. The leader of the orchestra desired to know their pleasure, and Vaculos sent him away to play the waltz of the moment. To the *sommelier* he whispered only one word. From the *maître d'hôtel* he took the menu and studied it.

"We expect friends," he said. "You can serve, however, a little caviare and hot toast for two, and open the wine as soon as it is cool enough."

The *chef d'orchestre* drew his bow across his violin, the music of the waltz floated into their ears. Little streams of wonderfully dressed people were trooping in. Rosina leaned back in her seat and gave herself up to the seductive pleasure of the place. Yet her eyes kept wandering towards the door. If only Madame would come!

Madame did not arrive but the supper did. Rosina crushed down her uneasiness, ate and drank, and did her best to be agreeable to her companion. Once or twice they danced. Vaculos danced well, if with little enterprise, and the novelty of dancing in such surroundings delighted her. Her companion pointed out to her the notabilities — the great French actor, the famous Russian danseuse, the Spanish woman for whose favours a king had sighed in vain, the great banker of the world, an American millionaire, an Italian prince with an historical name, and an English Cabinet Minister very much incognito. Vaculos appeared to know everybody. He was continually exchanging greetings with new arrivals, many of whom lingered, obviously in the hope of an in-

troduction to his beautiful companion. Vaculos, however, was obdurate. He treated the jests of his acquaintances coldly, and their hints with non-comprehending silence. Once he turned to Rosina.

"You are turning the heads of all these young men," he whispered. "You are very beautiful, Rosina."

She looked at him, a little startled.

"I think," he ventured, "that I have almost earned the right to your Christian name. You must admit that, considering this is Paris, my real home, and that I am your greatest admirer, the greatest admirer you will ever have in life, my behaviour has been exemplary."

She looked at him with a moment's sweet gravity.

"You may call me Rosina," she said. "You are certainly being very kind to me. And I think you understand. I hope so much that you do."

"It is not I," he replied, "who lack understanding. Rosina — be wise. You are, after all, very much alone in the world. I offer you a friendship which can remain the anchorage of your life."

She felt suddenly very helpless. The whole atmosphere was throbbing with sensuous pleasures of every sort — the lilt of the music, the perfume from the women's hair and dresses, the delicious odour of fresh and rare fruit. Every one was talking and laughing gaily and unrestrainedly. The place had become a temple of pleasure. The words died away upon her lips. Then suddenly she sat very still. She looked across the room eagerly, and with a glad smile of welcome upon her parted lips. Standing a little apart from the group of young people with whom he had entered, looking directly across at her with a very grave expression in his good-natured face, was Lord Reginald Towers.

"It's Reggie!" she exclaimed, — "Reggie Towers! Why doesn't he come and speak to me? — Reggie!"

Vaculos frowned. He by no means shared his companion's enthusiasm. Very slowly the young man detached himself from his friends and came towards them. There was no answering smile upon his lips.

CHAPTER XIII

Rosina gave him both her hands. Not even his unusual gravity affected very much her joy at seeing him.

"Reggie!" she exclaimed. "How delightful! Aren't I the last person in the world you expected to see here? You know Mr. Vaculos, don't you?"

Reggie nodded to her companion but did not offer his hand.

"What are you doing in Paris?" he asked.

"I came over this morning," she explained. "Madame is here — Mathilde, you know. We are going to look at models. To-morrow I shall be trying them on all day."

"Madame Mathilde is not here," Reggie remarked, looking around.

"She will be here directly," Rosina declared. "We came to meet her. She was out when I arrived at the hotel, but she left a note, asking me to get Mr. Vaculos to bring me here. She said she was coming after the theatre."

The young man glanced at the table, laid for two, and looked back into Rosina's eyes. Perhaps he read there something of the anxiety from which she had never been entirely free all the evening.

"What hotel are you staying at?" he enquired.

"Hotel des Beaux Arts," she replied. "Please forgive my bad accent. You know I can't speak French. I'm so horribly ashamed of myself."

"Hotel des Beaux Arts," Reggie repeated. "In what quarter of Paris is that?"

"It is a small, private hotel at which Madame has stayed for many years," Vaculos explained. "I really

do not know myself exactly where it is, but my chauffeur knows how to find it. I left Miss Vonet there, on my way from the Gare du Nord, and called for her afterwards."

"It is a very beautiful place," Rosina said. "I never dreamed that there could be such magnificent furniture in any hotel."

"I shall probably discover it in the telephone book," the young man remarked. "I shall certainly hope, Rosina, that you are able to spare me an hour or so whilst you are in Paris."

"Any time Madame is not wanting me," she answered, "I shall love it. She must be here soon. Then I will ask her."

He left them with a little reluctance. Again he did not offer to shake hands with Vaculos. He made his way to the far corner of the room, where his friends were already established. Vaculos looked after him with hate in his pale eyes.

"I do not like your friend," he said slowly. "He has the manners of the English upstart."

"I am sorry you do not approve," Rosina replied. "I am very fond indeed of Reggie Towers. He has been kind to me, and understanding. — I wish very much that Madame would come. I do not understand her leaving that note at the hotel and then not arriving."

"There are many things in life which you do not understand yet," Vaculos replied. "Madame has a dear friend here — shall I say at once a lover? They dined together. It may be long before they come."

"Then I think perhaps we had better go," Rosina suggested, a little timidly. "I have enjoyed it all so much. I do not wish to seem ungrateful, but I should like to go back to the hotel now."

Vaculos glanced at his watch. He himself was surprised at the hour — it was past two o'clock.

"Very well," he agreed, "shall we say in another ten minutes? Otherwise, your friend may think that he has frightened us away."

Rosina laughed.

"He wouldn't be so silly. I am not ashamed of anything I am doing. I am really very happy here. And you, Mr. Vaculos," she added, smiling up at him, "have been exceedingly kind to me."

Vaculos called for his bill. There was something about Rosina's direct gaze which was almost disconcerting.

"We may as well go," he said. "Madame has evidently forgotten all about us."

She gave a little cry of dismay. She had just recognised her next-door neighbour, who had entered some time ago with a very flamboyant young Frenchwoman.

"Monsieur Victor!" she exclaimed.

He made a little grimace.

"Be careful," he begged, under his breath. "Speak in English only. The young lady with me has a violent temper. Do not speak of Violet."

"As it happens, I cannot speak French," Rosina replied. "Violet will be so disappointed. She was expecting you in London to-night."

"One cannot always keep one's promises," he remarked, with a little shrug of the shoulders. "Still," he added, with a meaning glance at her companion, "I think it will be a fair bargain if we both of us say nothing."

"What do you mean?" she asked coldly.

"Nothing! Oh, absolutely nothing!" the young man replied. "You are here at half-past two in the morning with Mr. Vaculos, I am here with Mademoiselle Ninette. That is all. I think that we had each better forget our meeting."

"We came here to meet Madame Mathilde," Rosina

explained. "We have been waiting for her for two hours."

"You will wait much longer, I fear," Monsieur Victor observed, winking solemnly at Vaculos. "'Waiting for Madame Mathilde' will not exactly wash. Eh? — What is that?"

Rosina looked from one to the other of the two men. She saw an angry glance flash from Vaculos' eyes, a look of partial comprehension in the other's. She rose to her feet.

"I wish you good night, Monsieur Victor," she said. "I hope that to-morrow you will be able to go to England. Violet is very much distressed at your absence."

"And I wish you a speedy meeting with Madame," was the cryptic reply.

Rosina and her escort passed slowly down the restaurant towards the door. They were surrounded by the usual little crowd. Vaculos distributed largesse everywhere. Rosina looked rather wistfully across at Reggie. Again there was something in his expression which puzzled her.

"I don't think that Lord Reginald liked my being here with you," she remarked to her companion, as they descended the stairs.

"Is it any concern of his?" was the cool reply.

"Naturally not — yet I wish he hadn't looked like that."

They started on their homeward drive almost in silence. Rosina made an effort to be agreeable. Vaculos had shown her a great deal of consideration. It was not his fault that Madame had failed to keep her appointment. She concealed her discomfort. She talked cheerfully all the way, and, when they reached their destination and Vaculos had handed her over to the smiling lift boy, she held out her hand to him frankly.

"I shall never forget my first evening in Paris, Mr. Vaculos," she said. "I have enjoyed every minute of it. Thank you a thousand times. And good night!"

"It has made me very happy to be with you," he answered, holding her hand in his.

"One thing more before you go, please," she begged. "Will you ask some one here to tell me where I can find Madame's room? I must see her before I go to bed."

He turned and addressed the lift boy. They exchanged several rapid sentences. Vaculos turned back to Rosina.

"The mystery is explained," he announced. "Madame returned home from dinner soon after we had left, with a violent headache. She instructed them to ring up the Abbaye, but this youth confesses that he rang up the Café de Paris. She has left orders that she is not to be disturbed to-night, but that she will come and see you when she has her coffee in the morning."

"I am so sorry," Rosina said. "Thank you, Mr. Vaculos, and good night once more."

Rosina ascended to the third floor. The same maid was waiting for her on the threshold of her apartment. She chattered away in French, Rosina replied in English. Then they both laughed at one another and their mutual misunderstanding. Marie pointed to the bathroom but Rosina shook her head. She held out her arms and suffered the gown which she had been wearing to slip shimmering to the floor, exchanged her satin shoes for bedroom slippers, and wrapped her own modest dressing gown around her. Then she pointed to the door. Marie protested. She turned down the bed. Mademoiselle must undress. The hour was late and mademoiselle must be fatigued with travelling. Rosina planted herself in an easy-chair and shook her head. She pointed again to the door. The maid, with many shrugs of the shoulders, at

last took her departure. Rosina listened to the door closing behind her. Then she realised that she was alone. A queer sense of solitude oppressed her. There was not a sound to be heard, either in the streets outside or in the building. She walked all round the bathroom and bedroom, trying to find some notice or evidence as to her whereabouts. There was nothing at all. Yet she could not make up her mind to undress. She turned down the lights, except the shaded one by the bedside, and lingered in her armchair. The music of the evening was still in her brain. How wonderful it all might have been if only she could get rid of this hideous sense of depression!

She made up her mind at last to go to bed. She had risen to her feet and was in the act of taking off her dressing gown, when she suddenly stood as though turned to stone. Some one had turned on a light in the sitting room. Through the chinks in the door she could see the illumination. She even fancied that she could hear a chair wheeled up to the fire. She searched eagerly for a lock or a bolt. Neither was there. Then she stood, for a moment, thinking. Anything, she decided, was better than this uncertainty. She opened the door softly. Vaculos, fully dressed except that he had changed his dress coat for a smoking jacket, was reclining in an easy-chair before the fire, a freshly lit cigarette between his lips, an evening paper in his hand. At the sound of the opening of the door, he lifted his head. She looked at him, horrified.

"Mr. Vaculos," she exclaimed, "what are you doing here?"

He laid down the paper and threw his cigarette into the fire.

"My dear Rosina," he protested, "isn't that rather a strange question? These are my apartments. My bedchamber is on the other side of this sitting room. I am

sorry to have disturbed you but I thought that you had gone to bed."

She stared at him, aghast. Yet, mingled with her fear, was a great bewilderment. He had never seemed more matter of fact. His only desire seemed to be to go on reading the paper.

"What do you mean?" she demanded. "I don't believe this is an hotel at all."

"It is not," Vaculos replied equably. "This is my flat — rather a handsome one, in its way."

"Your flat!"

She began to shiver. Notwithstanding the man's coolness, waves of black and horrible thoughts were beginning to sweep in upon her.

"Madame — "

"Ah, Madame," he interrupted. "There I think you are a little at fault. Madame sent you a letter last night to say that this little trip was postponed."

"I never received it — I never had a line!" Rosina declared breathlessly.

"The messenger may have made a mistake," Vaculos conceded. "I do not think that Madame will admit the possibility."

"If the trip was postponed, then, why didn't you tell me so at the station?"

"My dear child," he explained, "I really couldn't bear to see you disappointed. So long as you were there, I conceived the wonderful idea of bringing you along with me. The little fancy I built up in my mind, I confided to you on the way. We have entered upon the first phase of it."

Rosina suddenly saw the ivory stud of an electric bell in the wall. She rushed towards it and pressed it. Vaculos made no effort to stop her.

"My dear," he expostulated, "you are wasting your

time. Those bells ring into an empty service room at night. If you desire your maid, I can fetch her, or if there is anything else you require, perhaps I can get it."

"I want to leave this place!" she cried.

"An awkward proceeding," he pointed out. "It is now half-past three in the morning. You speak no French, you have no idea where you want to go. I could not be so inhospitable as to let you leave my comfortable quarters. — You wouldn't care to sit down for a moment, would you?"

"Not again — in this place," she faltered. "Let me out. I can find my way somewhere."

"Rosina," he said calmly, "I beg that above all things you will avoid melodrama. There is, believe me, no occasion for it. You and I have been alone together once or twice before. Have I ever even touched your fingers?"

"No," she admitted, finding some scanty comfort in his measured speech.

"Believe me, it is no more my intention to intrude in any way upon you now that circumstances have made you my guest. My rooms lie on the other side of this sitting room. I should like to suggest that you went back to bed. We have a busy day to-morrow, and perhaps you will do me the honour to take your coffee here at ten o'clock."

She was dumbfounded. His manner was so amazingly matter of fact that the more sinister possibilities of the situation seemed to belong, as he had suggested, to a different world.

"Please help me to understand," she begged. "What is your object in trying to keep me here?"

"To live through the fairy story I propounded to you in the train," he replied. "I wish you to be my guest for a week — a week on probation, forever if you choose. For that week, I, who know more about such things than

most men, will devote my every effort to showing you all the refinements and wonders of life, lived in the most wonderful city of the world, without regard to money or any sort of material consideration. To-morrow, for instance, after we have paid a few visits in the Rue de la Paix, I shall take you to Versailles, where for as many hours as you choose you can feast on beauties which exist nowhere else. You will be tired after that, and you must rest. Then we go to the Opera — your gown is already ordered — and we dine late. Afterwards, we visit the cafés and supper places, if you feel like it. Otherwise, we have an early night and prepare for the morrow."

The indignation which tore at the very fibres of her being, found no adequate expression.

"I will have nothing to do with your absurd scheme," she declared. "Let me go. I would rather walk about the streets than stay here."

"That is very foolish," he remonstrated, "especially as it is raining. I am really giving you a wonderful opportunity, Rosina. You are a young woman with a very charming disposition, and you have been brought up with certain ideas as to what is right and wrong. You have strength of mind, narrowness of view, and an imagined affection for a worthless young man. Those characteristics, coupled with the fact that you have no idea what may lie in the world of which you know nothing, might well make you impregnable. I am giving you the opportunity of looking upon the other side of the picture without committing yourself, for to all that I have said yet, Rosina, I have this to add. It is not my intention during that week to intrude upon your privacy in the slightest degree. I do not ask, even, for the clasp of your fingers. You shall live the life of perfect self-respect and self-containment to which you are accustomed. If I fail, at

the end of my experiment, to awaken in you desires for a different sort of existence to the miserable one which you have been living, if you have no kindlier feelings towards me at the end of that time than you have now, then my experiment will have been a failure. You can return to England, and I guarantee that Madame shall receive you as before and shall be in a position to offer to everybody concerned intelligent and convincing reasons for your absence."

Rosina amazed herself and him. She leaned against the wall and began to cry. Sobs shook her frame. With the passing of imminent danger, a reaction seemed to have sapped her courage. She felt suddenly helpless, as though she must pass out of life through sheer inertness, sheer inability to breathe an atmosphere containing new and poisonous qualities. Vaculos placed a chair by her side and poured out a glass of water. He went back to his seat without touching her.

"You disappoint me," he said calmly. "I have often thought that I have never known a young woman so splendidly free from all hysterics. You are in no danger. You can retire to your apartments when you choose. This communicating door is unfortunately without a bolt, but I offer you the word of honour of a man who has never broken it that you will remain undisturbed until your maid attends you in the morning. Why weep? Nothing terrible has happened to you. You are simply being given an opportunity of seeing both sides of the picture and making a deliberate choice. — I will relieve you of my presence."

He rose to his feet. Suddenly, however, he stood still, listening to an unaccustomed sound. The lift had stopped at their floor. He heard the voice of the attendant. A moment later, the bell of his outside door was pressed by no uncertain finger.

CHAPTER XIV

Rosina stiffened into sudden attention. Vaculos stood with a heavy frown upon his forehead. The ringing was persistent. With a shrug of the shoulders, Vaculos moved towards the door. Almost as he did so, however, the ringing ceased. There was the sound of voices. A moment later, François, in *dishabille*, made an apologetic entrance.

"I heard the bell ring from my room, sir," he said. "There is a gentleman outside who says his name is Lord Reginald Towers. He begs to be allowed a moment's conversation."

"You can show him in," Vaculos directed.

Reggie was already in the room. Rosina's expression was, in a way, a singular one. Her whole being seemed thrilled with gratitude, yet she stood there breathing quickly, wondering, gazing at the newcomer with an expression which he utterly failed to understand.

"Look here," he began gravely, "I beg that you will neither of you misunderstand my visit. Miss Vonet is a friend of mine, but she has a perfect right to do as she chooses, and if I am an intruder here, there is nothing left but for me to offer my sincere apologies."

"Yours is a late visit," Vaculos said calmly. "Perhaps you will explain its exact purport?"

Reggie glanced at Rosina. She was obviously in a state of great excitement, but her tongue seemed paralysed.

"It was the 'hotel' that did it," the young man continued. "Miss Vonet told me that she was staying at

the 'Beaux Arts Hotel.' I got a telephone book and found there was no such place. Then I suddenly recollected that your rooms were in the Rue Beaux Art. — Look here," he went on, a little awkwardly, "I may be making a most infernal ass of myself, but I couldn't sleep — I just had to come round here. Is there anything wrong, Rosina?"

She suddenly gripped his arm.

"Take me away!" she begged.

Reggie's manner became more decided. The lines about his mouth were grimmer.

"It appears that I was right, then," he said, turning to Vaculos. "I shall have to trouble you for an explanation."

Vaculos smiled cryptically.

"Up to the present," he observed, "Miss Vonet and I have managed to conduct our affairs without melodrama. I beg that you will restrain yourself. Miss Vonet can tell you everything that there is to be told. She is also free to leave this flat whenever she chooses."

"I choose now," Rosina sobbed.

Vaculos shrugged his shoulders.

"That," he admitted, "is a disappointment to me."

There was a dangerous look in the younger man's eyes.

"Rosina," he enjoined, "go and put on your things. You can explain afterwards how you got into this position. I want a word with Mr. Vaculos."

Rosina, like a dumb thing, passed into the inner room. Reggie Towers waited until the door was closed; then he turned to the other man.

"Mr. Vaculos," he said, "I know very little about you, and that little isn't good. Have you any explanation to offer as to Miss Vonet's presence here?"

"By what right do you question me?" Vaculos enquired.

"I am Miss Vonet's friend and compatriot," Reggie replied. "God knows what you are! I want you to understand this, though. If things are as they seem, for once in your life you are up against it. I'm going to give you a thrashing."

Vaculos smiled. He took a cigarette from an open box and lit it.

"No, I do not think that you will do that," he said.

"I can assure you that it is my firm intention," Reggie declared. "I don't care a damn that you're an older man than I am, or a smaller. If you decoyed that girl here, you're going to suffer for it, whether any harm's been done or not."

Vaculos stood quite at his ease on the hearth rug in front of his log fire.

"I can see that you are chock-full of Drury Lane stuff," he remarked. "Got it right up to your throat, haven't you? However, I will be frank with you."

"You had better," Reggie advised, moving a step nearer. "Be quick about it, too."

Vaculos stared across at him.

"You will oblige me by not coming any nearer," he ordered.

Reggie laughed mirthlessly.

"Unless you hurry up with that story, you'll find I shall be a great deal nearer before many seconds have passed," he threatened.

"I shall tell you the story in my own time," Vaculos replied, "and you will stay just where you are. I am, as you remark, an older man, and perhaps without great physical strength. For that reason, and because it is a fancy of mine to walk the streets of Paris late at nights, I am always prepared."

His hand slipped in and out of his waistcoat pocket. He held something which glittered softly under the elec-

tric light, something no larger than a silver pencil case.

"This, I think," he went on, "is the smallest pistol ever made. I don't suppose it would really ever hurt any one, unless they were shot in the heart or the brain. I once killed an Arabian with it, but then he was only about a yard away. I am not a coward, Lord Reginald, but I object to the indignity of having my person touched. For that reason, I shall shoot you if I find it necessary to do so. I would rather suggest that you listen to my story."

"Go on, then," was the impatient response.

"I plead guilty to getting Miss Vonet here, believing it to be an hotel. I plead guilty to nothing else. Miss Vonet is a young woman for whom I have a profound admiration. I am used to feminine society and I appreciate it. You, I believe, resemble me in this respect. No one would ever associate Miss Vonet with any of the small indiscretions of life. She has at once too much character and too much self-respect for anything of the sort."

"Then what the devil did you inveigle her here for?" Reggie demanded.

"To give her an opportunity," Vaculos replied, "of seeing both sides of the picture of life. Miss Vonet will tell you that I have not said a word to her which could be considered unbecoming or in bad taste. I have not even attempted to touch her fingers. I should not have done so during her stay here. She herself knows that. Ask her, if you do not believe me."

"Then what the mischief does it all mean?" the young man demanded.

"It means that I am a man of taste and refinement," Vaculos explained, a little wearily. "The seducer belongs to another world. I know nothing of him or of his arts. I desired to show Miss Vonet exactly what might be her life if she chose to throw in her lot with mine. For

that reason, I meant to keep her here for a week, and I think that, if she had got over the shock of finding herself alone with me, she would probably have remained my guest for that period. She ran no risk. If I kept her here by guile, I kept her here only as an honoured guest, to give me an opportunity of pleading my cause and explaining the situation. You have arrived before she has been able to establish her sense of proportion. You find her in a state of hysterical revulsion before her brain has begun to work. It is my bad fortune, perhaps it is hers. I should have introduced her to artists, men of letters and musicians. I should have had her educated until she understood the rarer pleasures of life. Incidentally, I should have made her rich, given her an established position, and probably ended by making her my wife. You have spoilt my scheme."

The inner door opened. Rosina stood there, dressed in the clothes in which she had arrived, and carrying her green canvas suitcase. Reggie turned towards her.

"Look here, Rosina," he said, "I can't get at this fellow. He's talking over my head. Will you tell me this? Has he taken any advantage of his position here — offered you any unwelcome attentions, or that sort of thing — what?"

Rosina shook her head.

"No!" she declared steadily. "I do not think that I had anything to fear from Mr. Vaculos, unless —"

"Unless what?" Reggie demanded.

"Unless what?" Vaculos echoed, looking at her steadfastly.

"Unless I myself had changed," Rosina faltered.

Reggie opened the door.

"I'm not satisfied," he said, "but we'll leave it at that. Come along, Rosina."

Rosina looked across at Vaculos. He had turned his

back upon them. Reggie took her bag and she followed him out to the lift. They descended in silence. He handed her into his car.

"I'm afraid I have nothing better to offer than my rooms," he said regretfully. "I can get a shakedown at the Embassy. Awkward sort of time, you know, isn't it?"

"What time is the first train back to London?" she asked.

"Seven o'clock."

"Please take me to the station," she begged. "I have a fancy to get there quickly. I don't want to go anywhere else. Would it bother you very much?"

"Not a bit," he assured her, "but the Gare du Nord is a jolly uncomfortable place."

"That won't matter," she answered.

He directed the chauffeur and they drove through the silent streets, northwards. There was a pale light everywhere upon the houses; the pavements were glittering with rain.

"You mustn't wait with me," Rosina enjoined, as they approached their destination.

"Don't be an idiot," he replied. "I'm not going to leave you alone here."

She gripped his arm.

"I can't talk much."

"No need. We shall be there in a minute or two now."

They found a café open, close to the station, and he made her drink some hot coffee. Then they paced the dreary platform together for what seemed to be an interminable time. Finally the train backed in. He found her a place at once. She sank back amongst the cushions and gave a little exclamation of relief. He asked her one last question, a few minutes before the horn sounded.

"Look here, Rosina," he said, "tell me the honest

truth. Did that brute frighten you at all? You seem terrified still. It seems to me that he must have done something more than just keep you there."

She shook her head. She was looking very pale and drawn, almost as though she were recovering from an illness. Her eyes seemed to have become unnaturally large.

"He did not even touch me, Reggie," she answered. "I knew that I was quite safe from that. It was my soul he hurt. He made me listen. I shall get over it very soon. Just now I feel as though the other part of me — not my body at all — were filled with poisons."

The horn sounded. He was forced to step back. His parting recollection of Rosina was of her wan face pressed against the window — a very pitiful attempt at a smile.

CHAPTER XV

Rosina never quite understood the instinct — it amounted almost to an obsession — which sent her into hiding immediately on her arrival in London. She reached her rooms about four o'clock, feverishly collected her few belongings, and drove away in a taxi before Violet's return. She found a single bedroom in the top story of a grimy house at the back of Russell Square, established herself and her belongings there, and went straight to bed. She awoke in the morning refreshed, but still with the sense of carrying an almost intolerable burden of memories. She did her best, however, to thrust these into the background. Once more she was confronted with the stern necessity of earning a living. She counted her money — she had altogether five pounds, thirteen shillings. Then for the first time she opened the packet which Miss McAlister had slipped into her hand, and found that it contained two five-pound notes. She added them gratefully to her little stock, bought a *Daily Telegraph*, and started out with rather weary footsteps on the quest to which she was now no stranger. After five hours of disappointments, she climbed the stairs of her vacated rooms in Endell Street and pushed open the door of the tiny sitting room. Violet, who was bending over the stove with a teapot in her hand, turned around with a little exclamation.

"Rosina!" she cried. "Goodness gracious, what a shock you gave me! What on earth has happened to you?"

"Nothing much," Rosina answered. "Give me some tea, there's a dear."

"Of course! There's some toast, too. Fancy your turning up like this without a word! Why, the old lady downstairs said that you swept in yesterday afternoon, packed your things in five minutes, caught up your American letter, and ran away like a mad thing. What does it all mean?"

Rosina ate toast and sipped her tea contentedly.

"It means, I suppose, that I am an idiot, Violet," she confessed, "but there it is. Madame never came to Paris — never meant to go. I was left to travel over alone with Mr. Vaculos, and when I got there — well, things weren't very pleasant."

Violet sat down on the hearth rug, clasping her knees with her hands.

"Tell me about it, dear?" she begged. "Madame is in a terrible state because you're back here and haven't been to the shop."

"I shall never go back to the shop," Rosina declared. "I never want to see Madame again, or any of them. Last night, Violet, I felt I didn't even want to see you. That is why I ran away. I have a little room of my own, quite close to here."

"Cat!" Violet exclaimed. "But tell me all about it."

"There isn't much to tell," Rosina acknowledged. "I suppose, according to his lights, Mr. Vaculos behaved very well, and that, from his point of view, I behaved like a hysterical fool. He took me out to supper, showed me a note in Madame's hand-writing, saying that she would be there, and afterwards, when we got back, I found that I was in his flat instead of at an hotel."

"A most gorgeous place, every one declares," Violet said. "Victor told me all about it once, and Maud Stevenson — she left before you came — stayed there."

"It was very beautiful," Rosina admitted, "but I did not wish to stay there. Reggie Towers — the young man

you have seen me with once or twice — was at the restaurant where we went for supper, and came round afterwards to be sure that I was all right. I preferred to leave with him, and I came home by the seven o'clock train from Paris yesterday morning."

Violet looked wonderingly across at her companion.

"Well, if you're not the strangest girl, Rosina!" she declared. "However do you expect to get through life?"

"My own way or not at all," Rosina answered.

"Mr. Vaculos is a millionaire," Violet persisted. "He could have given you the most wonderful time in Paris. With a little management, you could have done what you liked with him."

"Perhaps so," Rosina replied. "The idea did not appeal to me, so here I am. You think I'm a little fool, of course. Perhaps you're right."

"What have you been doing all day?"

"Trying to find a job."

"But you'll have to come back to the shop," Violet insisted. "Madame will be furious if you don't. She knows there's something wrong, because she's had a telegram from Mr. Vaculos. She told me to tell you, if I found you here, that she was expecting you back to-morrow morning."

"I shall never return," Rosina replied, calmly helping herself to the last piece of toast.

"But why?"

"I cannot exactly tell you. The whole atmosphere of the place has suddenly become hateful to me. Besides, it was partly Madame's fault. It is a hateful thing to say, but she understood exactly what was happening."

"Well, you know best," Violet observed. "I have lived in the world a little longer than you, and I tell you honestly, my child, that, even if you mean to live like an angel for the rest of your life, you would do better to treat

this as a joke. There isn't a girl in the place who wasn't longing to be in your shoes."

"It has been no joke to me," Rosina declared. "I don't pretend to be the least bit better than you other girls. I dare say you've all got better stuff in you than I have. But in just one way we're entirely different. We won't discuss that."

"I believe that Madame would double your salary rather than not have you go back," Violet confided. "Mr. Vaculos will be furious."

"Nothing," Rosina insisted, "will ever induce me to set foot in the place again."

"And what about me?" Violet asked, a little ruefully.

Rosina leaned down and put her arm around her friend's neck.

"Violet dear, don't be angry with me," she begged. "Don't think I'm putting on airs, or trying to make myself out better than any one else, but I've had a strange sort of shock inside. I'll talk better about it later on. I feel years older. I've lost my taste for all the things you and I used to rather hanker after — beautiful clothes, and the theatres, and smart restaurants. I want to bury myself somewhere. I shall get over it. Perhaps I'll come back to you later on, if you'll have me. I'm going to try typing again, if I can get a job."

"Have you any money, old thing?" Violet asked.

"Heaps," Rosina answered, — "enough to keep me going for a long time. Better let me have the book and we'll settle up here. I want to pay my share of the sitting room for as long as you think fair, and for my bedroom, of course, until the end of next week."

Violet made a little grimace.

"You don't need to worry about that," she said. "There's a girl in the showrooms who'll come along here

at once, if I want her. She's rather a dear, but giddy, I'm afraid. If you pay for your bedroom till Saturday, and half the sitting room, that will be all you need do."

They deliberated over the book, and arrived at a settlement in a light-hearted fashion.

"Here's my address," Rosina confided, scribbling it down on a piece of paper, — "Number 10, Mandeville Street. It's just behind the Museum — a horrible little room, but it will do for the present, until I can pull myself together. You'll send any letters on, won't you? But don't give it away — promise that, there's a dear, Violet. I couldn't hide from you, but I don't want another soul to know where I am."

"I won't breathe a word," Violet assured her. "You'll have trouble with Madame, though."

"Nothing that she could say would make any difference," Rosina declared. "I shall never set foot in the shop again. And as for Madame herself, I have the most horrible feeling when I think of her."

"You'll come round soon and let me know how you're getting on?" Violet begged.

"Honour bright," Rosina promised. "I'll come about tea-time — I like the way you make toast."

Rosina invested a considerable portion of her capital in a small typewriter and obtained several commissions from the agency where she had enrolled her name. She had three letters from Madame, the first begging her to return and offering her an increased salary; the second almost tearful in its entreaties; the third still appealing but with an undernote of anger. Rosina took no notice of any of them. Another letter, which interested her more, came from a firm of solicitors in Lincoln's Inn, inviting her to call. She made her way there on the morning of its receipt and was introduced at once into the

presence of Mr. Houghton, the principal of the firm. He received her courteously and begged her to be seated.

"I wasn't sure whether you had some typing to give me," Rosina explained. "I have brought my machine with me."

Mr. Houghton waved it away.

"Our business with you is of a different nature," he said. "We have received instructions from a very valued client who has been obliged to leave England for a short time, to pay you weekly the sum of four pounds."

"To pay me?" Rosina exclaimed. "What for?"

"There are no conditions," Mr. Houghton replied. "The donor is a well-wisher of yours, and he desires for the present to remain anonymous. We have simply to pay you four pounds on any day of the week you may select, and obtain your receipt."

Rosina sat quite still for a moment. The first breath of summer had seemed to be in the air as she had walked through the streets that morning. For a moment she fancied herself at the sea, or at a cottage in the country, resting, away from these interminable grey streets, this continual routine of seeking work. Four pounds a week! And all the time, underneath, that hateful fear!

"I must know from whom this money comes?" she decided at last.

The lawyer shook his head.

"That is contrary to our express instructions," he said.

Rosina smiled at him. Her smile was still a wonderful thing.

"You must please just give me a hint," she begged. "There is one person from whom I would accept nothing. If I tell you his name —"

"This is most unprofessional, Miss Vonet," Mr. Houghton interrupted. "My instructions are absolute. I can

tell you nothing, negatively or positively, except that there are four pounds a week here for you at any time you choose to come and claim them."

"If the money were from Mr. Vaculos," she explained, "I would tear the notes into pieces before I touched them."

"So far as I am concerned, I have nothing more to say," the lawyer announced, a little stiffly. "My clerk, Mr. Bonham, whom you will always find in the office outside, will pay you the money at any time you choose to apply for it."

"You won't tell me whether it is from Mr. Vaculos or not?" she pleaded. "I want the money so badly, but I'm afraid it must be from him."

The lawyer looked at her and rang the bell. A small boy showed her out.

"Did you wish to speak to Mr. Bonham, miss?" he enquired.

She hesitated in the stone-flagged passage. Her earnings for the last week had been twenty-four shillings, and her capital had dwindled to a very low ebb. She stamped her foot, however, at the surprised boy.

"No!" she answered, and walked out of the place.

CHAPTER XVI

Mr. Vaculos, newly landed from the giant Cunarder in New York, was lunching with Miss Alma Gawthorne at the Ritz-Carlton. They had not met for many months, and they had plenty to say to each other.

"You are looking tired, Stephen," the young lady remarked sympathetically. "Did you have a bad voyage?"

He shook his head.

"The voyage was well enough," he said. "I could not sleep. I think I am a little tired of the old world. I was probably missing you all the time."

She threw back her head and laughed.

"Why didn't you send for me? I have never yet refused an invitation to Paris. And now it is too late. I am booked to work — work hard, too."

"Tell me about the new play?" he suggested.

"It is just wonderful," she declared. "When I first heard it read, I thought that it was a little above the heads of a New York audience. The second time, I began to catch on. The third time, I was convinced that it was really the cleverest piece of work I had ever come across. I think it's going to be the biggest success we've ever had, Stephen. London will go crazy over it. I sha'n't tell you a thing about it," she went on, "because we're going right down-town to a rehearsal from here."

"What's the author's name?" Vaculos enquired.

"He's quite unknown," she replied, — "an English boy whom Duggie Erwen brought out with him from London, and who has been acting as a sort of secretary to him

ever since. He's written one or two rather high-brow stories, but I haven't come across any of them. And they say that he has a novel on the press. This is his first piece of serious work for the stage. I am quite sure that I have never had such a part in my life."

"And the young man's name?"

"Philip Garth. He is rather a dear, but he keeps his head well up in the clouds. They say he's engaged to a girl in London, and saving all his money to go back and marry her. He doesn't come round with the crowd, anyhow."

"You would be very disappointed not to play this part?"

"My dear Stephen, I should be broken-hearted," the young lady declared. "Why do you suggest such a thing? We have the firm offer of the play. Everything is settled, indeed, except for your signature of the contract. When you have seen the rehearsal this afternoon, I promise you you'll be calling for pen and ink."

"Shall I?" Vaculos muttered. "Well, we shall see. I have peculiar tastes sometimes, you know. By the by, how is Jimmy? And are the Bedales still going strong? I saw Anna in Paris — without her husband."

Luncheon was concluded amidst a mutual interchange of gossip. Afterwards, they drove down to the theatre. Miss Gawthorne endeavoured to revert to the subject of the play, but her companion was not inclined to discuss it.

"I'm going to sit and listen to it for the next few hours," he pointed out. "Let me come to it fresh. If I like it, I shall say so. If I don't, I shall also say so."

"For heaven's sake, don't suggest such a possibility!" she exclaimed. "Why, the whole company would be broken-hearted! They're all practically engaged, and we're talking about London already. Jimmy is fright-

fully keen on your sending a company over from here. However, he'll talk to you."

"Does this Mr. Garth know who is your backer, Alma, and the owner of the theatre?" he asked.

"He doesn't know your name," she replied. "I have always been careful to keep that secret. Of course, after this afternoon, I suppose he will have to know."

They reached the theatre — one of Vaculos's most costly possessions. The latter lingered for a few minutes upon the stage, shook hands with the principals, and finally was introduced to Philip. He studied the young man intently.

"We met in London once, I think," he said, "although we were never introduced. I came to a party given by Douglas Erwen at the Savoy. You were with a young lady who had a small part in his play."

"I remember the party," Philip remarked, with a little grimace. "I'm afraid I behaved rather badly at it. As you say, though, I don't think we met. I left rather early."

Vaculos nodded.

"I am going to listen to the play," he said. "I shall take a seat back in the stalls. Please ignore me as much as possible, all of you. I want to be the disinterested spectator."

The producer knocked with his cane upon the little reading desk. The business of the afternoon commenced.

At the end of the first act, Alma Gawthorne made her way into the auditorium and sat by the side of Vaculos.

"Well?" she asked confidently.

"I have no opinion at present," he replied. "You must wait until the end of the play."

He began to talk about something else. Presently she left him and went back to the stage. At the end of the next act, he signalled to her not to come and sat there

quite alone, his pale face unnaturally white in the gloom of the auditorium. When it was all over, he rose slowly to his feet, walked down the centre aisle and across the baize gangway which had been let down on to the stage. They stood in a little group awaiting his arrival — Philip, confident and happy, Jimmy Dugdale, the producer and Miss Gawthorne's dramatic adviser, no less assured. Every one looked upon the decision as inevitable. There was something about Vaculos's appearance, however, as he came amongst them, which to Alma, who knew him better than any of the others, seemed a little ominous. He had grown older, she thought, as he came to a standstill. There were hollows under his unpleasant-looking eyes which made them seem unduly protuberant. He carried himself without briskness. He had the air almost of a tired man.

"Well?" Jimmy enquired confidently. "That's the real stuff, isn't it, guv'nor?"

"I am sorry to disappoint you all," was the cold reply. "The play does not please me in the least. I think you have all been led away by a slight unusualness of theme. I have come straight from the French theatres, so perhaps I am a little over-critical."

"Say, you're not going to jump it?" Jimmy Dugdale exclaimed, horror-stricken.

"That is precisely what I am going to do," Vaculos acquiesced. "The play does not please me, and I will not have it produced at my theatre. I have acquired the sole rights of two of Guitry's last productions. I shall reopen the theatre with one of them. If you are coming along, Alma, we will take a turn in the park before dinner."

The little company of people was stricken almost dumb with amazement. Philip was standing as though he scarcely understood, nervously fingering the manuscript.

"Say, what about the contracts?" Jimmy Dugdale demanded.

"I shall not sign them, naturally," Vaculos declared. "I will undertake, however, to engage the whole of the artistes you had collected for this production, for the play which I intend to produce, so that none of them will be the losers. As regards the author," he added, his eyes resting for a moment upon Philip, — "well, I am sorry for your disappointment, Mr. Garth. I do not think your play would suit my audiences. You may have better fortune with it elsewhere."

He turned away, pausing for a moment for Alma to precede him. She turned, however, to Philip and held out her hand.

"Mr. Garth," she said, "I just want to tell you how sorry I am that Mr. Vaculos feels this way about your play. I am going to tell you right here, before him, that I think he's made a mistake. Your play is splendid. Some day or other you'll get some one to produce it — I'm dead sure of that."

She held out her hand, which Philip found himself mechanically clasping. Then she departed with Vaculos, who had stood by with immovable face. They disappeared through the wings. Every one exchanged glances of consternation. The actual members of the company, however, were recovering from their first dismay. The fact that they had all been promised parts in another production was a great consolation.

"Say, that's hard luck, old chap!" Jimmy Dugdale exclaimed compassionately. "Garth, old man, I can't say how sorry I am. Let's get along to the club and talk this over."

Philip's back had broadened with the years. He even summoned courage enough to smile.

"It is a disappointment," he admitted. "I certainly

did not think that any one could take a positive dislike to the play."

"It's the queerest thing I've ever known," Dugdale continued, as the two men passed out into the street. "We submit everything for the old man's approval, of course — he owns the theatre and runs the show — but it's the first time in seven years I have ever known him to upset anything we've gone for. And Miss Gawthorne, too — crazy about the part! It gets my goat to think of it."

"It can't be helped," Philip said, stopping upon the causeway. "I'm not coming round to the club, Jimmy. I may be along for dinner, but I want to get back to my rooms and think this out."

"That's all right, old man," Jimmy declared. "I only wish I could help you. You know what New York theatres are. I shouldn't have said there had been a single one as free as we have been to make our choice of the stuff. I'll think it over by dinner time. May be able to suggest something."

Philip found his way to the subway and to Douglas Erwen's little flat on the top storey of a tall building in Fifty-seventh Street. He had occupied a small room on the same floor, opposite his friend's more extensive suite, since the day of his arrival in the States, but Erwen, who was cruising in the South Sea Islands, had insisted upon lending him his apartments during his absence. He let himself in, locked the door, took up a theatrical directory and made out a careful list of the managers whom he had not yet approached. Then he took a clean copy of the play from his drawer, and wrote in it the corrections and suggestions which here and there disfigured the soiled pages of the original copy. This work occupied him for an hour at least. Then, for the first time, he permitted himself to think of his disappointment. It might mean not seeing Rosina for another

six months — perhaps a year. He looked across the medley of buildings towards the hills on the other side of the Hudson. For a moment, a touch of the old weakness came back. He realised the fact which he had been sedulously denying — that he was hideously and pitifully homesick, that he longed more than anything else in the world for a sight of her, for the sound of her laugh, the touch of her fingers. It was a knockdown blow, this — the second of his life. His thoughts went back to the evening when he had torn open that little packet and beheld the visible prostitution of his first efforts, — the hideous-looking, cheap magazine, the cut sentences, the ludicrous illustrations. The very recollection gave him strength. He was far better able to stand this second blow. Already he was mounting. One or two of the best magazines in the States had published his stories. There was the novel, his great hope, soon to appear; a second begun, already intriguing him, already providing him with one of those select chambers of thought into which he could pass when time and occasion served. This fellow Vaculos — was it ignorance, or could it be in any way personal dislike? He was reputed to be a good judge of a play, something of an artist and a literary man himself. But a decision so speedily taken, so unhesitatingly spoken, carried with it suggestions of bias. The matter lent itself to no solution, however. With a little shrug of the shoulders he put it on one side. His play had been turned down — that was all that mattered.

At dinner time that night, Jimmy Dugdale, his very good friend since the days when Erwen had first introduced him into the bohemian society of New York, helped him to formulate a plan of campaign amongst the likely theatrical managers in New York. Afterwards, Philip visited Jane McAlister, who sent her love to Rosina, was amazed to hear that Vaculos had turned down the play,

and promised to do her best in other directions. The days went by, however, and nothing happened. Meanwhile, he went steadily on with his novel, tried his best to forget his disappointment, and wrote cheerfully to Rosina. One morning came a telephone message from Jane McAlister. He was to call, if possible, some time during the day. In half an hour he presented himself at her office in Fifth Avenue. She took off her horn-rimmed spectacles and motioned him to a chair.

"Philip Garth," she announced, "I've got the best man in New York screaming about your play. Walter Addison was here yesterday himself. He told me that he hadn't read anything for five years that he'd like to produce so much."

"Walter Addison!" Philip exclaimed. "Why, there isn't a better man in the world! I thought of him many a time when I was writing it."

"This is where we're up against it, though," Miss McAlister continued. "Wallie lost a hundred thousand dollars over that Rostand production. He hasn't got a cent to his name, and, though he's got an option on the Grand, the best theatre in New York for your play, he hasn't the money to clinch it. You know, as a rule, Wallie won't be backed. He hates it. But beggars can't be choosers. He wants to produce your play, but he can't do it without the dollars. Have you any wealthy friends? Can you suggest any one who might go into a syndicate?"

"Not a soul," Philip acknowledged frankly. "The friends I've made over on this side are just about as hard up as I am."

Jane McAlister sighed.

"That's hard luck," she declared. "I've rung up a couple of men myself who sometimes like to come into a theatrical speculation, but one's away in Bermuda, and the other only cares about musical comedy. Likes a

cheap call on the girls for supper parties, and that sort of stuff. The worst of it is, Addison's option on the Grand Theatre is up before long, and I heard a rumour yesterday that Vaculos was after it."

"The man who turned me down," Philip remarked.

Miss McAlister nodded.

"You never ran up against him in any way, did you?" she asked curiously.

"Not that I know of."

"It's a queer business," she ruminated. "Wallie asked me about it. It seems he spoke of the play enthusiastically, the night before last at the club, in front of Vaculos, not having heard that it was through him that Alma Gawthorne had to give it up. Said he couldn't understand how, if Alma once got her fingers on it, she let any one else have a show. Next thing is that we hear that Vaculos is enquiring about the lease of the Grand, knowing that Wallie's option is almost up. If you put two and two together, Mr. Philip Garth, it rather looks as though this man Vaculos had it up against you."

"To the best of my belief," Philip declared, "I had never spoken to him in my life before we met on the stage at the theatre."

"It's hard luck," Jane McAlister repeated. "I'll try one or two other of my friends, but money's scarce just now. I'll fix it up for you if I can, for that dear little girl's sake. Give her my love, and run along now."

Philip took his leave, puzzled yet not altogether disheartened. It was encouraging, at any rate, that the most finished actor in America liked the play and wanted to produce it. He made his way back to his rooms and planned out a great day's work. He had his lunch sent up from the restaurant on the ground floor of the building and worked until he suddenly found his eyes aching and the lights flashing out from the tall buildings and in

the street below. There was a knock at the door. His invitation to enter was entirely perfunctory. He looked at the tall figure who stood upon the threshold, without in the least recognising him.

"I can't see who you are," he said, "but come in."

He rose to his feet and turned on the electric light. Then he gave a little exclamation.

"Uncle Benjamin!" he almost shouted.

CHAPTER XVII

On the whole, perhaps it was the greatest surprise of Philip's life. Rosina had written almost pathetically of Benjamin Stone, their old tyrant, his money gone, working as night watchman at Matthew's warehouse for three pounds a week. And here, dressed as he had never seen him before, in the well-cut clothes of a travelled Englishman, clean-shaven, with his unkempt locks trimmed, and with his everlasting frown for the moment, at any rate, banished, was the man whom he himself had been wondering whether it might not be possible in some small way to assist.

"Philip, my lad, I am glad to see you," the newcomer declared.

"I'm glad to see you, Uncle Benjamin," Philip replied, "but you've taken my breath away. Did Rosina know you were coming?"

A shadow passed across Benjamin Stone's face.

"I have seen nothing of Rosina for some time," he admitted regretfully. "We met in Regent Street, many months ago. She was kindly and she seemed well, but she was busy fashioning her own life. I offered her a home — a poor one, perhaps — but she preferred her freedom."

Philip smiled.

"Rosina will have all the freedom and all the adventure she wants, presently," he said. "I am doing a little better out here, and, apart from the love of my work, I work for one purpose only, and that is to go back and marry her."

"That is very good news," Benjamin Stone declared. "It's the best news I've heard for some time."

"And Matthew?"

"He is a great man in the city. He has made his mistakes but I think he has learnt his lesson. He will soon be a wealthy man. It is what he desires most in life."

"Matthew's ambitions were always tolerably concrete," Philip remarked. "And now about yourself, Uncle Benjamin? What has brought you out here?"

"Above all," the latter confessed, with a touch of his old manner, "to ask your pardon, my lad."

"My pardon?" Philip repeated wonderingly.

"For a wrong done to you in my thoughts, a wrong that has kept me stern and aloof when I might have been helpful. You remember the night before you left Norchester?"

"Yes?"

"You went down to the factory alone."

"Quite true. I had a few things down there I wanted to collect."

"Fifty pounds was stolen from the cash box that night," Benjamin Stone declared, — "fifty pounds in Treasury notes. I discovered it that selfsame night, for I, too, was in the building. I accounted you the thief."

"Good God!" Philip exclaimed. "I've been rather a rotter, uncle, but I never stole a penny of any one's money in my life."

"I believe you, my boy," Benjamin Stone assured him solemnly. "As it happens, the real thief has now confessed. I was shocked when I realised the wrong I had done you. I am here to tell you that I'm sorry. Now that's over and done with. You'll take dinner with me, I trust? We will go to my hotel."

"Rather!" Philip assented cordially. "Where are you staying?"

"The Waldorf-Astoria. I just went where the others went who were on the steamer. It's a noisy place but clean."

Philip was staggered.

"I'm afraid you'll find it rather expensive," he remarked, as he reached for his hat.

"I must make the best of it," Benjamin Stone sighed. "It is not for long, anyway."

Philip discovered new and amazing qualities of sympathy in his host that evening. He found himself, before dinner was over — a dinner offered without any regard to that economy which had been Benjamin Stone's predominant impulse — talking freely of himself, of his plans and disappointments. At the mention of the name of Vaculos, the old frown made its reappearance on his listener's forehead. He stopped his late ward abruptly.

"Vaculos, did you say? It's the name of the man they spoke to me about at the dressmaker's where Rosina was employed."

"Tell me about that?" Philip begged.

Benjamin Stone deliberated for a moment.

"I lost track of Rosina," he said, "after our tea together that day, and I had a fancy for finding her, to discover if perhaps she needed a trifle of help. I went to the shop where she had been employed — a terribly fashionable place, Philip. They told me that she had left. Then a dark, foreign-looking woman came up and spoke to me. She said she had no idea where Rosina was, and she told me that Rosina had treated her very badly through leaving, and got her into trouble. I said I was sorry, and I was for taking my leave but the woman wouldn't let me go. She told me that Rosina — don't take this seriously, my lad, for from the moment she opened her mouth I knew that the woman was a Papist and a liar — had gone with-

out permission to Paris with a Mr. Vaculos, and had never returned to the shop."

"So that was the man!" Philip muttered.

"Anyway, I could find no trace of her until just before I was sailing," Benjamin Stone continued. "I thought of going to see her, then I decided to wait until I got back. I left some money with a lawyer, to be paid her weekly, so she'll be in no manner of want, whatever may have happened."

"But the last time I heard anything about you," Philip protested, "Rosina told me that you were night watchman at a warehouse and earning three pounds a week — that you had lost all your money and were practically destitute."

Benjamin Stone smiled.

"That was a slight exaggeration," he confessed. "I am not exactly destitute — I am not even poor."

"I am delighted to hear it!" Philip exclaimed. "And as for Rosina, don't you worry any more than I do. I mistrusted her once, and I've felt the shame of it ever since. I shall never mistrust her again. She's of finer clay than we others. She could walk through hell and come out unsinged."

Benjamin Stone's face suddenly cleared. He leaned across and patted his companion on the shoulder.

"That is well-spoken, lad," he declared, "well-spoken indeed. Now I'd like you to take me to one of these roof gardens they talk about. It makes one anxious to get out of doors here to see what all the noise is about."

"You'll never discover that," Philip assured him, noticing with some surprise the indifference with which his companion signed the bill, and the munificence of his tip. "And with regard to the roof garden, you understand — it's a sort of music-hall performance?"

Benjamin Stone smiled.

"I have made a few changes in my outlook upon life during the last twelve months, Philip," he said. "They tell me that hundreds of thousands of people visit these places. I am certainly no better than the rest, so I will go with them."

Miss Jane McAlister gazed with some curiosity at her first visitor on the following morning. The name of Benjamin Stone conveyed nothing to her. The somewhat austere, fine-looking Englishman who was presently ushered in was a complete stranger.

"Mr. Benjamin Stone?" she enquired, looking at him over her horn-rimmed spectacles. "What can I do for you?"

"I have come to see you," Benjamin Stone replied, "with reference to a play written by a young friend of mine — Philip Garth."

Jane McAlister was at once interested.

"Sit down," she invited. "I am a busy woman, but I've time enough to talk about that play."

"I understand," her visitor continued, "that it was to have been produced at one of the principal theatres here, but for the intervention of a Mr. Vaculos?"

"Sure!" Miss McAlister assented. "He served the boy a rotten trick and we none of us know why. The play is better than anything that's been on the stage here for the last two years."

"And I also understand," Benjamin Stone proceeded, "that an actor who is very favourably known here — "

"Wallie Addison," she interrupted tersely. "He's keen on the play but he hasn't got the money. I'm looking for some one to put it up. If that's your errand, you're welcome."

"How much money would be required to produce the

play, and who is a responsible person with whom I can deal?"

"I guess the whole business can go through me," Miss McAlister said, a little doubtfully, "but you've got to understand, Mr. Stone, that producing a play in New York, and renting a theatre, isn't child's play. The theatre's to let now for a year at two thousand dollars a week. To produce the play and have something in hand for expenses and salaries, there should be another thirty thousand dollars available."

"That makes how much in English money?" he enquired.

Miss Jane McAlister pencilled it out.

"It means about eight thousand pounds cash," she announced, "and about five hundred a week for the rent. The lessor of the theatre would require guarantees."

Benjamin Stone drew a cheque book from his pocket.

"I arrange this through you, then?"

"Say, are you going to finance the whole show?" she demanded eagerly.

"That was the object of my visit," he assured her.

"Well, this is great!" she exclaimed. "I'll 'phone down for Wallie. It's he who's got the option on the theatre. You understand, Mr. Stone, that the money will be wanted in cash?"

"I bank at the Bank of England," Benjamin Stone remarked, "and they have a branch here. They will honour my cheques. Ring up your friend Mr. Addison at once, Miss McAlister, but afterwards one word more, please."

Jane McAlister was busy on the telephone for several minutes, then she laid down the instrument with a smile of content.

"Wallie will be right over," she announced. "Now for that other word, Mr. Stone?"

"There's no need to tell the young man just yet who is finding the money," his guardian admonished. "He'll find out by and by, no doubt, but just at present — "

"That's O. K.," Miss McAlister interrupted brusquely. "Philip won't care. He's not much of a business man, anyway. I shall just tell him that I've found a backer, and that will be all he'll want to know — at first, at any rate. — You'll stay and meet Mr. Addison? "

"Certainly! " was the ready assent. "I think it will be best for me to go with him to the lessors of the theatre. I should like to have everything fixed up, if possible, before luncheon."

"I don't see why not," she mused. "For an Englishman, you're some hustler. What's your hurry, anyway? "

"I'm sailing for England to-night," he announced, — "that is, if I can see this affair through first."

"If you can show the dollars," Jane McAlister assured him, "you can see almost any piece of business in the world through in New York in half a day. Wallie won't keep us waiting — I can promise you that."

"Before he arrives," Benjamin Stone said, "I want to offer you my thanks, Miss McAlister, for an act of great kindness which you once performed to my niece."

"Your niece? " she repeated. "Who's she? "

"Rosina Vonet — the young woman whom you took into your rooms at the Savoy one night."

"You don't say! " Miss McAlister exclaimed, with interest. "Why, you're the uncle these young people lived with up in Norchester, then? I've heard of you, but they neither of them ever mentioned your name."

"You were very kind to Rosina that night," Benjamin Stone continued, "and I'm glad to be able to thank you."

"As to the kindness," she declared, "that's nothing worth talking about. A woman of my age who doesn't

help a young girl who is up against it would be a pretty mean creature. But now I know who you are, Mr. Stone, I'd like to ask you this: Do you think you were right in letting a girl as beautiful as your niece be around London alone, struggling to make a living?"

"I think I was very wrong," Benjamin Stone admitted. "I have tried to make amends. My other ward, if you have ever heard of him — Matthew Garner — I have already been able to help out of a serious difficulty. You see yourself that I am doing what I can for Philip. Rosina is different. I have failed to understand her, and I have perhaps failed in my trust. I left money for her in London, which, I understand, by a cable which I received last night, she has refused to touch. That is why I am returning to England at once."

"She is a sweet child," Jane McAlister declared. "If I can fix things to be in London in the fall, I shall hope to be at her wedding."

"You will be a very welcome guest," her visitor assured her.

"And here's Wallie, sure enough," Miss McAlister went on, as she recognised a familiar voice in the outer office. "That's some hustle for a lazy man! Come right in, Wallie," she called, as a man thrust his head tentatively through the half-open door. "Come right in and shake hands with Mr. Benjamin Stone of England."

CHAPTER XVIII

Rosina lay in bed and watched the sunlight pour into her room through the wide-flung window. It was a very shabby, though scrupulously neat apartment. A typewriter stood upon the table, carefully covered over. The pages of copying which she had completed on the previous night were all sorted and in order by its side. Her clothes were neatly folded up. Her little brown teapot and two slices of bread stood ready upon the tray. She looked around and shivered. The place spelt poverty, dire and complete. She was conscious of an appetite which those two slices of bread could do nothing to appease, of a call to the sunshine which was hopeless, a longing for the country unrealisable. She swung slowly out of bed, opened a drawer, took out her purse, shook it vigorously and counted its contents. Three and sixpence and two stamps were all she could find, and, before she went out even for a Sunday morning stroll, her landlady was expecting the rent, unpaid the night before, of twenty-five shillings.

She leaned out of the window until she could catch a glimpse of a distant church clock. It was nine o'clock — later than she had expected. She fingered her coins again, took threepence away, clad herself in a flimsy dressing gown and marched out on to the landing.

"I'll start the day recklessly, anyhow," she murmured to herself, as she pressed the coins into the automatic receptacle of the bathroom and waited whilst the door swung open.

She stayed there for fully half an hour, and returned

to her dreary little room in a more cheerful frame of mind, put on her kettle and watched it boil whilst she dressed. There was no milk, and only one knob of sugar in the little canister. The bread she felt with her finger and sighed as she realised how hard it was. She ate a few mouthfuls and felt her appetite depart, drank her wishy-washy tea and slowly completed her toilette. She was just about to sit down at her typewriter when there was a knock at the door. In reply to her somewhat dubious invitation to enter, Violet, very smartly dressed for the sunny morning, put in her head and entered, closing the door behind her.

"You cat, Rosina!" she exclaimed. "Why have you called off our little excursion?"

"Work to do," was the terse reply.

"You're not working and I don't believe it," her visitor declared, looking around the room in vain for a chair and finally seating herself on the bed. "What's wrong, dear? You might as well tell me. I bore you often enough with my troubles."

"Nothing much is wrong," Rosina answered, "except that I haven't any money."

"I called you a cat when I came in," Violet observed deliberately, "and I repeat it. You're a miserable little sneak. I offered to stand treat, didn't I? You can't sit at home on a Sunday morning like this."

"You paid for nearly everything last Sunday," Rosina reminded her. "I know you're a dear, Violet, but I can't bear it."

"Utter selfishness!" Violet pronounced. "Here am I dying for a jaunt in the country, and you make all these silly excuses. I'm drawing five pounds a week now, stupid, and my clothes don't cost me a penny. Victor gives me nearly everything, and there's always somebody about to take one out to lunch or dine. What's the use

of having a few shillings in your pocket if you can't share them with a pal? Come on, dear. Get ready. I don't want to do anything swanky, and we won't have anything to do with the boys. We'll just take a bus down to Richmond, if you like, and sit in the park, under the trees."

Rosina rose to her feet. She came over and sat by her friend's side, and rested her head for a moment on her shoulder.

"You're the dearest thing, Violet," she said, "and I'm a horrid little prig, but I hate it. If I thought I could pay you back some time, I'd rather borrow from you outright."

"Why, you stupid little owl, you'll have all the money you want, some day," Violet assured her. "Wouldn't you be the first, now, to insist upon looking after a friend who'd struck a bad streak? Of course you would! What sort of a day do you think I'm going to have by myself, if I think of you stewing up here? Why the devil don't you come back to Madame's? The woman can't bite you, and you know all about us girls. Tommyrot, I call it! You sit here and nurse your pride and starve. By and by the oof will flow in, but you'll have hollow cheeks, you'll have lost your looks and probably be in a consumption. Look at your breakfast! Wouldn't keep a sparrow alive! Get your hat on, you silly idiot. I shall sit here till you do, anyhow. — Hullo! Another visitor!"

Rosina made a grimace.

"That's my landlady, come for twenty-five shillings I haven't got," she said, "though why she troubles to knock, I can't imagine. — Come in, Mrs. Bendle."

The door opened a little hesitatingly and Benjamin Stone entered. The two girls stared at him in blank amazement. He removed his hat and looked about him in some confusion.

"I'm sorry if I have done wrong in coming up," he began. "I was very anxious to see you, Rosina."

Rosina recovered herself.

"This is my uncle, Mr. Benjamin Stone — my dear friend, Miss Violet Shaw," she said. "I — you — "

Everything that Rosina had meant to say died away upon her lips. Benjamin Stone was wearing clothes cut by a West End tailor, and which were eminently unsuitable for a night watchman at three pounds a week. He was entirely transformed, both in appearance and expression. Violet plunged into the breach.

"If you're Rosina's uncle," she said, smiling up at him, "you've got one of the dearest girls for a niece any one ever had, only — don't think me impertinent, will you? — why don't some of you look after her? She can't take care of herself any more than a baby, and she's as proud as a female Lucifer, if there can be such a thing. We've been going out for walks together, the last few Sundays — little excursions that didn't cost more than a few shillings. We've both loved them. To-day, Rosina sends word that she can't come. I've come along to rout her out, and I've found out why. She hasn't got the money to pay her share, and she's too proud to be treated."

"Don't listen to her," Rosina begged. "It's been just one of my bad weeks, that's all. My uncle has very little money, either, Violet," she added. "Three pounds a week, isn't it, Matthew pays? — Stingy beast! A man needs more money to live on than a girl, too."

"If your uncle only gets three pounds a week," Violet exclaimed, gazing at him wonderingly, "all I can say is — he doesn't look like it!"

Benjamin Stone was already losing his fears and his awkwardness. Rosina was unchanged. She bore no malice. He felt a wonderful sense of contentment.

"It is quite true," he admitted, with a smile, "that I

have been drawing three pounds a week as a night watchman, but I took the post, not from any need of the money, I can assure you, but for a reason I shall have to explain to Rosina some day. In the meantime, as to this little Sunday excursion. What about my being host? You won't mind accepting a little hospitality from your uncle, Rosina? And so far as regards this young lady — Miss Shaw, I think you said? — "

"Violet," the young lady interrupted. "I'm on, if you're thinking of including me. What fun! We thought of a bus to Richmond Park."

"I have a car outside," Benjamin Stone announced, a little diffidently. "We might, if you cared to, go a little farther — Surrey, or even down to the sea."

"Whoop!" Violet exclaimed, springing down from her seat on the bed. "The uncle of a fairy story! You're not kidding us?"

"My niece will assure you that I am not a person who indulges in practical jokes," Benjamin Stone declared, smiling.

"And you really are her uncle?" Violet demanded.

"I most certainly am," he assented.

"Then, for God's sake, give that old scarecrow downstairs twenty-five shillings and let Rosina have a happy day!"

"Violet!" Rosina expostulated. "How can you!"

"I am very much obliged to you, Miss Violet," Benjamin Stone assured her eagerly, opening his pocketbook and withdrawing a note with trembling fingers. "Rosina, perhaps you will arrange this. In case your friend should think too hardly of me, let me explain that I returned from New York at a moment's notice, immediately I learned by cable that you had refused to draw any of the money I left for you."

Rosina stared at him.

"That *you* left for me?" she exclaimed. "Do you mean the money that the lawyers in Lincoln's Inn offered me?"

"Why, of course!" her uncle replied. "I never imagined that there could be any reason why you should refuse to accept it. I even left it without disclosing my name, in case you should have any scruples."

Rosina wrung her hands. There were tears in her eyes, although she was trying to laugh.

"And I refused it because I thought it was from another man!" she cried. "Oh, what an idiot I have been! I should have taken it at once if I had dreamed it had come from you, Uncle Benjamin," she assured him. "Please believe that. I was very angry with you once, but it was chiefly Philip's fault, and I had been rather badly tried. I thought you both might have trusted me a little more."

"If Rosina can't be trusted," her friend declared warmly, "there isn't a girl in the world who can. She's the best that ever lived. She makes all us others feel ashamed of ourselves sometimes."

"She has made me feel ashamed of myself," Benjamin Stone admitted gruffly, "but I am hoping to be able to make amends."

"And meanwhile," Violet insisted, "tie on your hat, Rosina, and let's start off."

They descended the stairs, waiting for a moment whilst Rosina, with a sense of relief almost indescribable, sought out her landlady and discharged her liability. In the street, Violet gave a little scream of delight.

"A Rolls-Royce limousine!" she exclaimed. "Rosina! Did you ever dream of such a thing!"

"Are we really to get in here?" Rosina asked incredulously.

"My dear," her uncle replied, "you can ride in it every

day, if you want to. I bought it the day before I left for New York."

She clutched at his arm.

"You've seen Philip?" she whispered.

"I've seen Philip and I've read part of his play," he told her. "It is to be produced at the Grand Theatre in New York next month. A Mr. Walter Addison is taking the principal part, and they all say that Philip will make a fortune. In any case, he is coming over here in a few months."

It was all too wonderful. They seemed to be in the country almost at once, a country bathed in sunshine, soaked with perfumes after the warm rain of the day before. They lunched at a famous but secluded hostelry amongst the Surrey hills, the two girls in the wildest spirits. Their table was near the window, and Rosina suddenly caught hold of her uncle's hand.

"Uncle, look!" she exclaimed. "Look at the car coming up the hill!"

Benjamin Stone smiled grimly as he looked out and recognised its occupants. A very handsome limousine car, which had somehow the appearance of being a little too flashy, with claret-coloured cushions, and a footman by the side of the chauffeur, both in claret-coloured livery, was slowly crawling up to the entrance. Mrs. Garner, erstwhile Ford, was leaning back in the right-hand corner seat, a dignified vision in pongee dust cloak, motoring hat and veil. Matthew, in grey tweeds and Homburg hat, sat by her side, smoking a cigar. They were a very opulent-looking couple.

"Matthew seems different, somehow," Rosina reflected.

"I think he has had rather a shock," her uncle remarked. "Perhaps it has steadied him."

The newcomers arrived in the dining room presently, and Matthew recognised Rosina and Benjamin Stone with

a stare of amazement. Afterwards, however, he ventured upon a salutation which Rosina amiably returned. Mrs. Garner raised her lorgnettes.

"She's asking about us," Rosina whispered in delight. "Can't you hear her? — 'Who are those queer people, Matthew?' What a pity you two look so smart and I'm so shabby! Uncle Benjamin, does Matthew know that you really didn't need that three pounds a week?"

"I think he must have guessed," was the quiet admission.

After lunch they sat on the terrace, basking in the sunshine and looking out over the rolling stretches of heather. Benjamin Stone left them, after a time, to order the car, and, a few minutes later, Matthew came deliberately across to where the two girls were waiting.

"Rosina," he asked, as they shook hands, "can you spare me a moment? There is something I should like to say to you. Perhaps your friend will be very kind — "

"Take my place," Violet interrupted, jumping up. "I am going after your Uncle Benjamin, Rosina. I think he's too sweet to be left alone for a minute."

Matthew sank heavily into the vacant seat. He turned towards Rosina. He was very impressive.

"Rosina," he said, "I am very glad indeed to see you with your uncle. I should like to speak to you seriously."

Rosina's eyes twinkled.

"You're sure you mean seriously, Matthew?"

Matthew neither smiled nor looked self-conscious.

"Listen to what I am going to say, Rosina," he begged. "It is for your own good. Your uncle is evidently disposed to befriend you. Lose no opportunity of keeping in his good graces. For some reason or other, he has chosen to wilfully deceive us. He assisted in the circulation of reports as to his losses. The whole thing is ridiculous. He is not only a very wealthy man but he is a

very clever one. It was I who was the fool down at Norchester. All the improvements I kept pressing upon him to put in the factory he was already putting into the other factories in the town, every one of which, Rosina — listen! — belong to him. The whole boot and shoe trade of Norchester is in his hands. He let our old factory run down because it was a tumble-down place and not worth spending money upon, and because all the other up-to-date factories already belonged to him. Why he pretended to be poor I can't tell you, but I can tell you this — he is a wealthier man than many a merchant prince of the City of London."

"How wonderful!" Rosina murmured. "And yet he really worked as a nightwatchman in your warehouse?"

"It was a fad of his," Matthew declared. "You needn't know too much, but I thought I'd give you the straight tip. He put his hand into his pocket, at the very time that he was drawing three pounds a week from me, and fetched out thirty thousand pounds. I know this for a fact, for we — er — go to the same broker."

"How wonderful!" Rosina repeated.

"I'll be getting back," Matthew said, looking nervously over his shoulder. "I'd like to bring Adelaide over, but she's rather peculiar and — well, you understand, I'm sure."

"Absolutely!" Rosina assented. "Run along, Matthew dear, before she sees you."

"Now you know where you are," he concluded earnestly, as he rose to his feet. "Don't know anything, be kind to the old man, and you'll find it will pay."

He hurried off, with the self-satisfied bearing of one who has performed a kindly action. Rosina watched the Rolls-Royce come curving round the hill. She stepped down happily to meet it.

As they neared London, on their homeward journey, Benjamin Stone broke a somewhat prolonged silence.

"Young ladies," he asked, "have you any plans for the evening?"

"I am perfectly free," Rosina declared, without hesitation.

"I can't remember any engagement for the present," Violet echoed.

"Then I should be glad if you would both dine with me at half-past eight," he invited.

Rosina passed her arm through his. Violet's acceptance had been prompt and unconditional.

"Uncle," she whispered, "aren't I an idiot! I cleared out some of my old clothes the other day — I haven't a frock but the one I am wearing."

"You don't need to worry about that, dear," Violet assured her. "We're near enough the same figure. I've two or three you can choose from."

"Capital!" her uncle exclaimed. "Rosina will not be returning to her rooms, so I would suggest that you bring anything you can spare round to the Savoy — say at eight o'clock."

"Not returning to my room?" Rosina repeated wonderingly.

"I shall give you ten minutes there to fetch your typewriter and anything you must have," Benjamin Stone announced, "and afterwards I shall pray that we both forget the place. I have a pleasant little suite at the Savoy, overlooking the river. I think you will like your apartments. Miss Violet must come and tell us whether she approves."

They reached London in time for tea at the Savoy, and Violet, when they made their little visit of inspection, approved very volubly indeed. Rosina's bedroom and bathroom, all in white, were charming. The sitting room,

fragrant with the perfume from great bowls of roses, had wide, curving windows looking out over the Thames.

"If some one would only send me a fairy uncle!" Violet sighed, as she concluded her delightful tour of investigation. "I am off now. I'll be here with gown and et ceteras at eight o'clock, Rosina. What fun we shall have!"

She left them, and Rosina came over almost shyly to her uncle's easy-chair, and sat on the floor by his side.

"If I seem stupid, I can't help it," she said. "I can't realise it all yet. I was just getting a little frightened of life. And even now I don't realise that it is you — really you — Uncle Benjamin!"

"We are both seeing life a little differently, dear," he declared kindly. "We have both made our mistakes, only yours have been the faults of youth and inexperience — mine, alas! the blunders of cast-iron prejudice. — Now I am going to leave you for an hour. You will need a rest."

She heard his receding footsteps, and the lift descend. Suddenly she had an idea. She followed him, running down the stairs with flying footsteps. He was stepping into a taxi as she reached the courtyard. She was just in time to hear the direction. She motioned the porter to open the door, and stepped in beside him.

"May I come, Uncle?" she begged. "I guessed where you were going."

He held her hand and they drove off together. They found a quiet corner in the Abbey, and there was nothing more wonderful to Rosina in that whole wonderful day than the ensuing hour. The place was full of shadows. Even the lights only seemed to shine into obscure places. The music which pealed softly through the great building, the distant voices of the choir, the intoning of the priest — everything seemed blended together towards a wonder-

ful peace. Later on, in the far distance, she could dimly see the figure of the preacher in white, and hear his sonorous voice as he leaned from the pulpit. They shared a hymn book for that final, wonderful hymn. They kneeled side by side for the benediction, heard the low strains of the great organ break the stillness that followed, heard it rise and swell into long strains of triumphant melody. When, afterwards, they reached the door, Rosina took her uncle's arm. They neither of them exchanged more than a casual word, yet they both knew that, in some mysterious way, a strangeness which it might have taken years to have bridged over, had gone.

As they entered the hotel, men and women in evening dress were passing down to the brilliantly lit restaurant. From the distance came the strains of pagan music. Rosina looked up at her companion a little anxiously.

"Uncle," she said, "are you quite sure that you don't mind dining down there? We might go somewhere much quieter. After all, it is Sunday night."

"My dear," he answered slowly, "I have changed my views on many subjects. The observance of the Lord's Day is more inward than outward. I don't think that any one could feel more devoutly grateful than I do to-night."

They moved on towards the lift. Rosina found realisation even yet a little difficult.

"Do you still own the chapel?" she asked, a little shyly.

"Bless you, yes!" he answered. "I preached there a month ago. And, by the by, they asked me to stand for Parliament for Norchester at the next election, when I was down there. Give me something to do besides looking after you young people. — You'd better run up," he added, as the lift descended, "and see what Miss Violet has brought you to wear. Here's the key. I am going to

order our table and dinner. I shall be up to change, in a minute or two. We'll meet in the sitting room."

The joy of the evening remained unclouded. Benjamin Stone had chosen the right table, with the aid of a deferential *maître d'hôtel* had ordered exactly the right sort of dinner, and there was even wine, of which he himself partook, although sparingly. His dinner suit had been made by the same West End tailor to whom he had given a large order a few months ago. Rosina, in Violet's most simple evening dress, looked radiant, and Violet herself proved that she fully possessed that finer note of humanity which finds unalloyed pleasure in the happiness of others. It seemed quite a fitting conclusion to the evening when Benjamin Stone, with the air of one who has just remembered something, thrust his hand into his pocket and brought out a small, grey morocco case, inscribed with the name of one of New York's most famous jewellers.

"I don't know quite what your fancy is for jewellery, Rosina," he said, "but they told me over in New York that, at your age, it would be pearls. Will you just slip these on? And, by the by," he went on hastily, as he saw Rosina's eyes begin to fill and the fingers which played with the gems tremble, "there was a little thing I saw there which rather took my fancy — not that I know much about such matters. I think it would be very nice if Miss Violet were to wear it in memory of this evening."

Violet gasped as her host produced a smaller packet from his other pocket, and, withdrawing a small platinum and diamond ring from its case, placed it upon her finger.

"Rosina," she cried, "if I wake up I shall kill myself! I've gone weak at the knees, staring at rings like this through the windows of Cartier's. I never dreamed I'd ever own one. I don't believe anybody's real. I shall ask

the waiter to pinch me, in a moment, if some one doesn't talk."

Rosina leaned forward. They were very wonderful pearls which hung around her neck — pearls of wonderful shape, with a faint, pinky lustre, opalescent and softly radiant.

"It's all real, Violet," she faltered, "beautifully, wonderfully real. Uncle, I can't kiss you here — I can't even thank you — but wait till we get upstairs!"

"You're not even my uncle, worse luck," Violet exclaimed, "but I say — like Rosina — wait till we get upstairs!"

Yet perhaps the most wonderful part of the evening, to Rosina, was its termination, when her fervid but almost hysterical farewell to Violet had been spoken, when, for the first time in his life, Benjamin Stone had voluntarily kissed her good night, and she was alone in her luxurious little bed-chamber. She wandered around for a moment aimlessly, looking at the exquisite linen, the comfortable gilt bedstead, Violet's nightdress laid out upon the coverlet, the little dressing case which her friend had packed for her upon the table. She peered into the bathroom, all white tiles and silver taps, looked into the bevelled mirror, and wondered at the multiplicity of towels. Then she returned to her bedroom, drew up the blind and looked out across the river. There was the Embankment, along which they three pilgrims had walked on the first day of their arrival in London, talking of wonderful things, making marvellous plans, a little too self-reliant, a little oversanguine, more than a little narrow-visioned. After all, more or less, they had stood the strain. Even Matthew, according to his lights — he, too, had survived. She had a moment's shuddering recollection of those grisly, phantasmal hours of temptation — saw Philip throwing up his arms once, only to struggle with renewed strength to the

shore; saw herself flying, often with tired footsteps, from the ugly shapes which seemed always to pursue her. She remembered a sentence in Philip's letter — the letter Benjamin Stone had brought her — and her lips curved into a wonderful smile. Theirs had been the same inspiration, the same weapon of conquest. There was even some faint echo of the same eternal truth in Benjamin Stone's altered attitude towards life. For there had crept into her mind, as she stood there — and the words lingered in her brain until her eyes closed in sleep — one of the few sentences which had reached them clearly in their shadowy corner of the Abbey, from that white-surpliced, dignified figure who had a habit of every now and then raising his voice so that one particular sentence stood out above the others:

> *Love overcomes evil. Love leads always to good, but be sure that you know what love is.*

CHAPTER XIX

Rosina thought more than once of that Sunday night dinner party when, scarcely a year later, she, with her husband and Benjamin Stone, M.P., a little flushed with the excitement of a wonderful evening, stood awaiting the arrival of their guests before they descended to the already crowded supper room of the Savoy. Interesting fragments of conversation reached them from every side. Apparently no one spoke or thought of anything else except the genius of the play, still being played in New York after nearly twelve months' run, but produced that night for the first time in London. A well-known critic, standing a few feet away from Rosina, expressed himself in no undecided terms.

"For a beginner and a young man," he pronounced, "such work is, to my mind, almost incredible. This fellow Garth — I am to meet him at the club to-morrow night; they're giving him a dinner there — must be the one man we've all been looking for. He is absolutely Grecian in his breadth and the splendour of his vision, and yet he has that intense hold upon modernity, that grip upon the little things that tell in our daily life, which marks the great artist. I shall drink my first glass of wine to-night to Philip Garth."

"Steady, old chap!" one of his companions admonished. "You ought to keep all this for the *Daily Thunderer*."

"I'm going down to Fleet Street to write my review after supper," the critic answered. "Nothing I can say

to-night — and I don't feel like talking about anything else but the play — will rob the public of a single word that belongs to them to-morrow."

The little group of men moved off. Rosina, an exquisite vision in shimmering white, laughed into her husband's face.

"Aren't we going to have our heads turned to-morrow morning!" she exclaimed.

"Not more than mine is just now," he whispered, gazing at her rapturously.

Then, out from the gentlemen's cloakroom, with the obvious air of waiting for his feminine belongings, came Matthew. He was a little stouter, he was dressed with great precision, and he gave one somehow the impression of glossiness. There were a few streaks of grey in his hair, and the flesh under his eyes seemed to have coarsened a little, so that they were narrower than ever. He recognised Rosina at once, and, after a moment's hesitation, approached her. Benjamin Stone had just introduced Philip to a fellow M.P., and the three were talking together.

"Well, Rosina," Matthew said, jerking his head towards her uncle, "I gave you the right tip, didn't I? You've hung on to the old boy, all right."

Rosina laughed.

"I've scarcely let him out of my sight since that day," she assured him.

"I'm a prosperous man," Matthew went on, "and it's not often I don't come out top dog at a bargain, but I'm never ashamed to admit it when I'm beaten. He's as hard as nails, is Uncle Benjamin, and as cute as they make them. What I cannot understand about him, even now, though, is what made him take on that job of watchman at my warehouse at three pounds a week."

"Conscience, perhaps," Rosina replied, "although I'm

not sure that he had much to reproach himself with. But why not ask him?"

"The old boy hasn't much to say to me," Matthew confided. "I'm the successful one of the three of you, but he doesn't seem to cotton to me, somehow. Philip doing any better?"

"A little, thank you," Rosina replied. "We were married some time ago, you know."

"Were you really! Well, I suppose you know your own business best, and there's the old man behind you both. Doing you proud to-night, isn't he—Savoy for supper, eh? We come three nights a week. My wife's so fond of the theatre."

Philip and the man to whom Benjamin Stone had introduced him — a famous essayist and traveller — had entered into an intimate conversation. Benjamin Stone turned away and approached Matthew and Rosina. The former held out his hand.

"Glad to see you here, sir," he said. "Haven't congratulated you yet on your election."

"Thank you, Matthew," the older man answered. "You haven't forgotten Rosina, then?"

"Never did," Matthew replied unblushingly. "I was always looking her up in the old days."

Mrs. Garner, elaborately gowned, and a little more ponderous than ever, sailed up behind and tapped him on the shoulder with her fan.

"I am ready, Matthew," she announced.

Matthew seized the opportunity.

"My dear," he said, "I should like to introduce Mr. Benjamin Stone, my guardian down at Norchester, you know; my wife, sir."

Mrs. Garner shook hands with some reserve. She was eyeing Rosina with disfavour.

"I am very glad to meet Matthew's wife," Benjamin

Stone declared. "Matthew has forgotten, though, that my niece, Mrs. Garth, is here. Let me present her to you, Mrs. Garner. Rosina was also my ward at Norchester."

Mrs. Garner's bow was frigid in the extreme. She opened her mouth to suggest moving on.

"Mr. Stone is M.P. for Norchester now, my dear," Matthew told her. "Buying a house in London, I understand. Perhaps we can persuade him to come and see us."

"A Member of Parliament?" Mrs. Garner said tolerantly. "A very distinguished position. I am not sure that I should not prefer Matthew to take an interest in politics to going in for civic honours. — Quite a gay crowd here to-night, Mr. Stone."

Benjamin Stone, who was quietly amused, murmured some answering remark. He drew Rosina's hand through his arm.

"We've just come from the theatre," Mrs. Garner announced condescendingly, — "first night of 'The New World,' you know. Most wonderful play! Sure to be a great success!"

"We have also been there," Benjamin Stone remarked.

"Indeed?" Mrs. Garner vouchsafed. "It was rather a favour to get seats, wasn't it?"

"You see, my husband wrote the play," Rosina observed, with a faint smile.

"Your husband?" Mrs. Garner repeated incredulously. "Your husband the author of 'The New World'?"

"Why, it was written by a chap named Almas Phillips," Matthew put in, — "been running for nearly a year in America. Fellow's made pots of money."

"'Almas Phillips,'" Benjamin Stone explained, "is Philip's pseudonym. Here he is to speak for himself."

Philip strolled up, shook hands a little reservedly with Matthew, and was introduced to Mrs. Garner.

"It's the most amazing thing I ever heard!" Matthew exclaimed, genuinely discomposed. "Do you mean to tell me that you're really Almas Phillips?"

Philip nodded.

"They thought a pseudonym was better for my first play, out in New York," he observed.

Mrs. Garner suddenly unbent. She unbent almost to fulsomeness.

"My dear Mr. Garth!" she said, shaking his hand. "I congratulate you most heartily! And Matthew tells me you're one of his oldest friends! You must bring your charming wife to see us. We live in Belgrave Square. Matthew will give you a card."

"You are very kind," Philip murmured.

"That wonderful James Hunter, who plays your hero," Mrs. Garner gushed on, "I never miss anything he acts in. I think he is simply marvellous."

Philip made a little bow of farewell.

"Hunter is a very great actor," he agreed. "By the by, I see him and his wife coming downstairs. They are my guests to-night. You will excuse me. Rosina?"

Mr. and Mrs. Garner most unwillingly moved on. Rosina was soon the centre of a group of new friends and old. Douglas Erwen was there, filled with the immense satisfaction of a man who has discovered a new sensation; Violet, a little shy but by no means neglected. Their supper party — a round table in the middle of the room — was the wonder and admiration of every one. From their distant corner, Mr. and Mrs. Garner looked at it with envious eyes.

"You never do seem to keep in with the right sort of people, Matthew," his wife complained irritably. "Mr. Garth didn't seem at all pleased to see you."

"You snubbed his wife so," Matthew reminded her.

"How was I to know who the little chit was," Mrs. Garner replied angrily, "especially after seeing you flirting with her in Kensington Gardens!"

"And how was I to know that Philip wasn't such an ass as he seemed?" Matthew rejoined gloomily. "The fellow was always wool-gathering — couldn't add up a column of figures correctly, never saved a ha'penny in his life."

"And there they are, and here we are!" Mrs. Garner wound up.

Philip, during the course of supper, read them out a telegram of anticipatory congratulation from New York:

> Best wishes from the company here and congratulations on your certain success. Four hundredth performance here, house packed, not a seat for a month.
>
> JIMMY DUGDALE.

"We shall beat that," Hunter declared confidently.

"Long life to the play and its author!" some one proposed.

The toast was drunk and acknowledged. Philip, who, owing to his own arrangement of the table, was a great deal nearer to his wife than he ought to have been, suddenly felt her eyes seeking his. She raised her glass and looked out along the lighted way towards the dark courtyard. He understood and also raised his glass. A little thought flashed from one to the other. It vas a wonderful celebration, but behind it all the greater things were moving.

THE END

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